

Men's Journal

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DISASTER ON K2:

Inside
Mountain
Climbing's
Deadliest
Day

Can a Drug
Make You
Smarter?

Australia's

Hugh Jackman

How He Defies Expectations
& Answers to No One

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THE WINE EXPLORER

MERLOT IS BACK

For years, overdone merlot has been too embarrassing to order. But now vineyards are turning out great-value bottles you just can't miss.

"IF ANYBODY ORDERS MERLOT, I'M LEAVING. I am not drinking any fucking merlot!"

The year was 2004; the movie, *Sideways*, an Oscar-winning hit about two old buddies on a wine-tasting road trip, with an eloquent anti-merlot rant that Paul Giamatti is guaranteed to hear recited for the rest of his life.

For the prior two decades Americans had fallen further in love with merlot, the velvety smooth red wine sometimes called "cabernet without the pain." But we Americans are an insecure lot when it comes to wine, and after *Sideways* we fled en masse from the merlot aisle. Good thing, too. Although merlot is both a key blending grape and a primary varietal in many fine French wines, during the late-1980s merlot craze, according to legendary Napa winemaker Tom Rinaldi, profit-driven wineries "were planting merlot in all the wrong

places and bottling stuff that should've been thrown out." The result: The whole varietal was living on borrowed time. Nowadays stellar merlots come at bargain prices, including classic Napa versions like Rinaldi's, from Provenance Winery; Washington bottlings that have earned that state a reputation as the grape's true home in North America; and inexpensive, delicious Chilean labels.

An easy-drinking crowd-pleaser, merlot made right has wonderful depth and complexity, more body and plusher fruit than pinot noir, hints of exotic spice, and enough acid for anything from roast chicken to braised pork belly or even a good hot dog. No wonder the inside joke of *Sideways* was actually on Miles: His favorite wine was the classic Château Cheval Blanc, composed partly of, yep, merlot. —DANIEL DUANE

①

BLACKBIRD VINEYARDS 2006 ILLUSTRATION \$90

This emulates the great wines of Bordeaux, with a nose of fruit, flower, and leather. Perfect with a rib eye.

②

MARQUES DE CASA CONCHA 2005 MERLOT \$19

There's a smoky, baconlike richness in this bargain of a wine that goes great with a classic BLT.

③

ANDREW RICH 2005 COLUMBIA VALLEY MESALLIANCE \$20

This is smooth, with black cherry, mocha java, and enough black pepper to make steak au poivre sing.

④

MATANZAS CREEK BENNETT VALLEY 2005 \$35

Bright with food-friendly acid, it's truly a California standard. Pair with lamb chops in savory mustard sauce.

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