



FROG'S LEAP

2020 MERLOT RUTHERFORD NAPA VALLEY

A BRIEF HISTORY

A part of the Frog's Leap family since 1990, Merlot is one of the most complex and difficult wines that we make—and also one of the most rewarding. The Rutherford district of Napa Valley is home to about 25 different soil types, and these soils have mixed and morphed over the eons to paint a picture that resembles a kaleidoscope. Merlot thrives only on a very narrow slice of these soils. It needs lots of clay in the soil—what old timers call “cold feet”—but the clay can't be too heavy, or it would delay ripening too much. If the soil is too weak, the fruit won't ripen; if too fertile, the vines become overly vigorous, shading the fruit and leading to unbalanced flavors. The grape requires a great deal of care in site selection and fine tuning during the growing season to come to optimal ripeness, and our dry farming and organic practices play a key role in this.

No less care is required in the winery, where the variety is often miscast as a “baby Cab.” If one pushes the extraction too hard, or overwhelms the wine with lots of new oak, it quickly gets anonymous, charmless and disjointed. On the other hand, if one is too gentle with the winemaking—the “baby Pinot” approach—then the resulting wine can feel narrow and undeveloped, having never been allowed enough room to reach its potential. However, when we get this Goldilocks variety just right, it is very hard to beat—red fruit flavors, plums and sage with an endless, supple texture. There is nothing quite like great Merlot.

ABOUT THE WINE

The clay soil in which our Merlot is grown is especially sensitive to changes in water content, and the 2020 crop was heavily influenced by a dry winter and growing season—our smallest crop of Merlot ever (until the even dryer 2021 vintage—spoiler alert). While tonnages were low, the moderate summer promised beautiful flavors, and that's exactly what we got. The timing of the Merlot picks dodged both the heat of early September and the wildfires at the end of the month, and the 2020 is destined to be a classic vintage of Frog's Leap Merlot. Winemaking was quite simple—native yeast fermentation, careful pump-overs, and natural malolactic fermentation in barrel. Aging was for 18 months in French oak, 13% new. The resulting wine is rich and supple, with the low yields perhaps pushing the fruit a little darker and more brooding than usual. With air, the wine opens up into exuberant herbal-floral black cherries with plush tannins. Versatile with food, I have one request of you with this wine: either give it a couple of years in bottle, or a healthy decant to allow to aerate—the time spent will pay big dividends. RW



THE VINES

100% Certified organic and dry farmed. The soils in the Merlot block at Red Barn have a relatively shallow layer of loam and gravel on top, with deep layers of clay below, the remnants of the outer edge of an ancient alluvial fan. The Merlot soils at Williams-Rossi are younger (geologically), and are primarily clay with very little loam.

THE BLEND

100% Merlot
96% Red Barn vineyard, Rutherford
4% Williams-Rossi vineyard, Rutherford

WINEMAKERS

John Williams
Rory Williams
Pablo Polanco

STATISTICS

harvested: August 23 (Williams-Rossi vineyard)
September 16 - 22 (Red Barn vineyard)
harvest chemistry: 23.1° brix, 4.9g/L
total acidity, 3.73pH
final chemistry: 13.3% alcohol, 6.5g/L
total acidity, 3.59 pH, 0.01% residual sugar
bottled May 26 2022 3,265 cases produced

VINEYARDIST

Frank Leeds

BALANCE, RESTRAINT AND DEEP RESPECT FOR THE NATURAL EXPRESSION OF THE VINE