



FROG'S LEAP

MERLOT
RUTHERFORD NAPA VALLEY

In 2005, when the movie *Sideways* hit and took its swipe at varietal wines made from Merlot, it changed the way many people think of this grape. One is tempted to blame the fickleness of the American public, but in truth, Merlot wines had it coming — change was necessary. Almost a decade (and several foreign language versions) later, I think that *Sideways* may have saved Merlot and ruined Pinot Noir – how's that for irony?!

Merlot done properly produces arguably the rarest, finest and potentially most expensive red wines in the world. It is in my opinion the most difficult variety to grow, and right up there with Pinot as the most difficult red wine to make. That is why when Merlot became so popular in the late 1990's and early 2000's, it became so abused. New winemakers did not always appreciate this, planted the grape wherever and tried to make it like Cabernet with training wheels – destined to produce plonk.

Merlot is a vigorous variety that needs very specific cool clay soils to slow its growth in order to develop its subtle red fruit aromas and its luxurious silky flavors. In Napa Valley, which is largely a system of alluvial fans, where gravelly, well drained, warm soils predominate, perfect for Cabernet but disastrous for Merlot. One needs (much like in Bordeaux) to find the rare, perfect soil for Merlot to even have a chance to produce excellent wine.

In the cellar, Merlot must be treated with great delicacy, much like Pinot and it is always best when not blended with black fruited varieties like Cabernet sauvignon or franc. Planted in the right soil, farmed with respect and made with baby's care, Merlot can make exquisite wine. Rare, fine, age-able and absolutely perfect where the cuisine requires a wine of subtlety and strength. Frog's Leap is dedicated to this task. J.W.