

THE RIGHT REDS

Move over, Cabernet Sauvignon. Two underdogs from Bordeaux's Right Bank might make better blends—and they're just right for dinner now. *By Sara Schneider*

THERE'S A QUESTION I'm asked more often than any other, and I'm almost always incapable of answering: What's your favorite wine? When I do give it a shot, I always have to add "for now." This month, though, I have a solid answer: the West's up-and-coming Bordeaux-style blends. And this is just the time to put the trend on your radar, because the wines are perfect with the full-flavored foods we love in fall.

I'm a little out of sync with the majority of wine drinkers in this new infatuation, though: Cabernet Sauvignon (widely dubbed "the king of reds") is the most drunk red wine in this country. And even many fans of French wines from Bordeaux think of Cab Sauv as that region's most important grape.

But ask Napa Valley's Aaron Pott, who makes Blackbird Vineyards wines as well as those under his own label, and he'll set you straight: "For me, the greatest wines of Bordeaux are made with Merlot and Cabernet Franc." These two Bordeaux grapes share characteristics with Cabernet Sauvignon—to a point. Merlot has rounder, gentler tannins, while Cabernet Franc carries lovely floral aromas. "They're richer in texture and generally more supple without having the intense dryness and astringency of Cabernet Sauvignon tannin," says Pott. He's in a position to know, having spent six years as a head winemaker in Saint-Émilion, France. In that region, which is on what's called the Right Bank of Bordeaux, Merlot is king of the blend, followed by Cabernet Franc. (By contrast, Bordeaux's Left Bank blends lead with Cab Sauv.)

Some call Merlot the "wimpy little sister of Cabernet," but it's the cornerstone of some of the West's most exciting wines.

Pott is one of a growing number of winemakers in California and Washington styling their wines after Right Bank blends. And while some call Merlot the "wimpy little sister of Cabernet," and others complain that Cab Franc has a tendency to taste a little green (something akin to green peppers) if it doesn't fully ripen, Pott says that's not the grapes' fault: "If Merlot is wimpy, and if Cabernet Franc is vegetal, it's because they're poorly farmed and grown on the wrong site. They should have planted Cabernet Sauvignon instead."

Right Bank-style blends have a huge advantage when it comes to food. While Cabernet Sauvignon seems to call just for beef and more beef, Merlot- and Cab Franc-heavy blends are happy with lighter-textured meats and even seafood, along with lots of fresh herbs and veggies (bring on the mushrooms!). In a tasting in our Test Kitchen, we loved the wines alongside several of *Sunset's* favorite recipes for fall entertaining: Tuna Roast with Ratatouille, Duck Legs in Green Olive Sauce with Cracklings and Pappardelle, and Charcoal-Grilled Pork Shoulder with Fresh Herbs and Roasted Garlic. (Find the recipes at myrecipes.com.) Especially to the point this month, these blends, with their exuberant aromatics and supple textures, would make a tasty match for our herb-splattered Thanksgiving turkey on page 78.

Indeed, these Right Bank blends are so versatile and delicious I might just be able to commit to them for the long term—and the bottle picks at right have special staying power.

SIP

Brilliant blends

These bottles have wide-ranging percentages of the five Bordeaux grapes (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cab Franc, Petit Verdot, and Malbec), but Merlot and/or Cab Franc figure prominently in all.



Anderson's Conn Valley 2012 "Right Bank" (Napa Valley; \$60). Spicy licorice and lovely floral aromas give way to generous dark plum flavors layered with appealing mocha and crushed-herb notes.



Andrew Will 2012 Ciel du Cheval Vineyard Red (Red Mountain; \$70). Layers of gravel and minerals tie this one to the earth. Dark, juicy cherry and blackberry flavors mix with anise and tobacco through a forever finish.



Atalon 2011 "Pauline's Cuvée" (Napa Valley; \$30). A pretty nose of violets and fresh herbs spiked with white pepper is followed by a burst of bright, spicy cherry and berry fruit with an interesting touch of tobacco.



Blackbird 2013 "Arise" (Napa Valley; \$50). An intriguing perfume of leather and florals leads into an elegantly structured palate, with chalky tannins lingering long with dark berries, black currant, and warm spices.



Trinitas 2010 Meritage (Napa Valley; \$60). This is a big wine that still finds a balance between delicate, high-toned floral aromas and a sturdy-structured mélange of briary berry fruit dipped in chocolate. ▽



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