



2004 Frog's Leap Merlot Napa Valley

There's an ashy, sage and thyme edge to this ripe young Merlot that actually adds interest to the cherry, blackberry and cranberry aromas and flavors. The wine is voluptuously rich, almost decadent, so ripe is the fruit and so fine are the tannins, but it never loses its dry sense of balance. Very Bordeaux-like in elegance.

91 Points

2003 Silverado Merlot Napa Valley

A great steak wine. It's so supportive of food, with its sweet, supple tannins and crisp streak of acidity. The flavors are forward but controlled, a complex mélange of cherries, cola, dark chocolate and smoky, caramelized oak.

91 Points

2005 Voss Viognier Carneros

A most interesting and complex Viognier. The strong, brisk acidity really strikes you, and is unusual for this variety, which is unusually soft. Then the flavors hit, showy but elegant, an array of crushed citrus zest, white peach yogurt, apricot, vanilla and dusty spices. Try this racy wine as an alternative to Chardonnay.

90 Points

2003 Voss Syrah Napa Valley

A little tannic right now, which limits immediate pleasure, but I have a strong hunch the wine will develop for five years. Alternatively, decanting will help. The wine has a solid core of blackberry fruit that's almost jammy. Interestingly, the winemaker added small amounts of Petit Verdot and Viognier, which boost depth and brightness.

89 Points

2004 Blankiet Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley

Starts out black and inky, with the ashy, charrly aroma that 100% new French oak brings to the tease of blackberry fruit. In the mouth, this is a very soft, almost sweet Cab, with the flavors of candied blackberries, carmelly peanut brittle, chocolate fudge and crème de cassis. It's so rich and exotic, it's almost obvious. Made by Helen Turley in the international style, huge and seductive. The estate vineyard is in Yountville, next to Dominus.

93 Points

2004 Blankiet Merlot Napa Valley

This is a stunning Merlot, impossibly rich. Saturated and opaque in color, it tastes fat and flashy, with masses of cherry and blackberry jam, anise, chocolate and Provencal herb flavors. Yet this opulently soft wine has a classic structure, backed up with firm tannins. This is a profound Merlot.

95 Points

2004 Frog's Leap Merlot Napa Valley

There's an ashy, sage and thyme edge to this ripe young Merlot that actually adds interest to the cherry, blackberry and cranberry aromas and flavors. The wine is voluptuously rich, almost decadent, so ripe is the fruit and so fine are the tannins, but it never loses its dry sense of balance. Very Bordeaux-like in elegance.

91 Points**2004 Pride Mountain Merlot Napa Sonoma**

You'll find tannins aplenty in this tightly wound mountain Merlot. That gives it a shut-down, dry astringency. Aging is the obvious situation, and such is the balance, the harmony that five to 10 years should soften and sweeten, letting the blackberry and cherry fruit emerge.

90 Points**2004 Gundlach Bundschu Rhinefarm Vineyard Merlot Sonoma Valley**

The vineyard is right on the border of Sonoma Valley and Carneros. Both are good places to grow Merlot, and this wine shows ripe cherry, pomegranate and spice flavors with cool-climate-influenced crisp acidity. It's a rich, sumptuous Merlot that's at its best now.

87 Points**2003 Pine Ridge Crimson Creek Merlot Napa Valley**

This is a blend of grapes from Carneros, Rutherford, Oakville and Stags Leap. One thing it offers is fruit. Red and black cherries and blackberries, to be exact, on the jammy side, with a spicy lift of new oak. It's not a complex ager, but it does show real white-tablecloth fanciness.

87 Points**2005 Grayson Merlot Paso Robles**

Two Best Buys in a row now for Grayson's Merlot, which constitutes a track record. The wine offers a wealth of ripe, forward blackberry, cherry and mocha flavors that are wrapped in soft, sweet tannins, and the finish is long and dry.

86 Points**2004 Grant Burge Miamba Shiraz Barossa**

This is rather big and burly, powdered by rich blackberry fruit, spice and earthy notes that are highlighted by brighter raspberry tones. It could use a more polished mouthfeel and greater length on the finish, but its muscular nature would do well paired with grilled steak.

88 Points**2005 Villa Maria Private Bin Pinot Noir Marlborough**

Light to medium-bodied with a pleasantly creamy texture, Villa's entry-level Pinot remains a consistent performer. Mushroom and cinnamon notes accent tart cherry-berry fruit, finishing with dark chocolate shadings.

87 Points**2005 Cono Sur Vision Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley**

A nicely made Chilean Cabernet that delivers ripe, toasty fruit-based aromas in front of tasty cassis and blackberry flavors. As for mouthfeel, it's full and layered as it pours on the toast and vanilla shadings. Simply stated, it's a clean, easy, fresh red wine with a bit of character.

88 Points

2005 Cono Sur Vision Merlot Colchagua Valley

Early on, this wine seems a touch grassy and green, but time permits the darker fruit characteristics to come out. In the mouth, expect berry and plum flavors mixed with a hint of herbal green, while the finish is oaky, minty and a bit hot. Robust and grabby, but a healthy specimen.

86 Points

2005 Kumkani Sauvignon Blanc Coastal Region

Grassy and herbaceous, this wine is full of gooseberry and green pepper and is an interesting alternative to the tropical fruit flavors of many SBs. The fruit grows in the Helderberg Hills, a coastal area that yields wines with an intense flavor and fuller body. Great for seafood.

85 Points

2004 Engelbrecht Els Vineyards Proprietor's Blend Western Cape

A collaboration between Rust en Vrede's Jean Engelbrecht and gold star Ernie Els, this blend is a balance of fruit, spicy Shiraz and earthy Bordeaux—a testament of the two styles the winemaking partners enjoy. On the nose are hints of mint and spice, and on the palate, heavy oak adds a woody element. Ample structure but still smooth.

89 Points

2005 Neil Ellis Sincerely Shiraz Western Cape

Flavors of cherry, blackberry, mocha, roasted meat and spice star in this soft, elegant wine. The mouthfeel is rounded and gentle, the finish light. A wine for those with a taste for lighter, less fruit-forward Shiraz.

86 Points

2002 Villa Russiz Graf de la Tour Merlot Collio

Tertiary aromas from bottle aging such as licorice, balsam notes and dried black fruit best describe this Merlot's bouquet; but there's also notes of moist earth, melted chocolate or spice that add character and complexity. This is a food-friendly wine with power, a medium consistency and firm structure.

88 Points

2004 Clos de Tart Clos de Tart

This grand cru monopole, owned by the Mommessin family, makes wine that charms easily, with its perfumes and berry fruit flavors. But there is a definite tannic character that only appears once the wine has been in your mouth for a few moments. Then it is apparent that it is dry, needing aging. The aftertaste is very fresh.

94 Points

2004 Domaine de la Romanee-Conti Richebourg

Smoky aromas set the scene for a complex, fascinating wine. Like so many 2004s, it is striking for the purity of its fruit. And if there is a hint of green in the tannins, this certainly doesn't do the wine any harm. It's more that it shows how much time it needs to mature. Aftertaste is fresh.

94 Points