

March 4, 2005

**TASTINGS**

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER



## High-End Merlots Get the Last Laugh

We Uncover the Serious Side  
Of an Underrated Grape;  
Outsmarting the Experts

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It's amazing how things change. When we began writing this column seven years ago this month, our daughter Media was nine years old and Merlot was the wine of the moment among sophisticates. "I'll have a glass of Merlot" was cool.

Now, Media is preparing for her Sweet Sixteen party. She has been trying on gowns for months and every time she models one, we wonder who in the world is that beautiful young woman standing in front of us. Merlot, meantime, has gone the other way, from a grown-up drink to the object of ridicule among aficionados as a kind of juvenile starter wine. One of the funniest and most widely quoted scenes in the movie "Sideways" is a broad slap at Merlot.

### OUR FAVORITES


 our favorites<sup>0</sup>.


In a broad tasting of American Merlots that cost \$20 to \$50, mostly from the 2001 vintage, **these were**

Indeed, there's a lot to dislike about inexpensive American Merlot. In tasting after tasting, we have found many of them sweet, alcoholic, thin and unpleasant, though there are always exceptions. But

here's the thing: The sad state of inexpensive Merlot has obscured the fact that more-expensive Merlot can be a very different experience.

Merlot is, after all, a noble grape. It is not only Cabernet Sauvignon's classic blending partner, but the primary grape of some famous Bordeaux wines, most notably the very prized Chateau Petrus. In our blind tastings over the years, we have found a more profound gulf between expensive and inexpensive Merlots than exists between other types of wine. While there are disappointments above \$20, of course, we have found many of those wines darker, richer, more serious and simply better. Way back in 1998, we first wrote about Beringer's "Howell Mountain, Bancroft Ranch" Merlot and called it "a wine for the ages." In 2001 we wrote of a Merlot from a then-obscure winery called Paloma: "A massive wine of real soul." Both of those wines have since become quite famous and cost far more than \$50 -- when they're available at all. But there are still some fine Merlots that cost between \$20 and \$50, right?

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher write "Tastings," the weekly wine column of The Wall Street Journal. They also are the authors of "Wine for Every Day and Every Occasion," "Love by the Glass: Tasting Notes from a Marriage" and "The Wall Street Journal Guide to Wine." A complete revision of that book, called "The New and Improved Wall Street Journal Guide to Wine," was published in September 2002.

Ms. Gaiter and Mr. Brecher have been married since 1979. Ms. Gaiter was a national reporter and editor covering issues of race for the Journal from 1990 to 2000. Mr. Brecher was Page One Editor of the Journal from 1992 to 2000. They began writing "Tastings" in 1998 and became full-time wine columnists in 2002.

