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California Merlot and Zinfandel

New reviews of a dozen exciting young reds from the Golden State, some collectible, some good values

Tim Fish

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The sturdy reds of summer are arriving in full force, and fans of California Merlot and Zinfandel have plenty of new wines to uncork. This report includes both bargains that are widely available and sought-after collectibles that you may want to buy now.

First, the good values. Leading the pack is the Kokomo Cuvée 4791 Dry Creek Valley 2008. This small Sonoma winery, which has impressed us with its recent Pinot Noirs, has created a supple and juicy kitchen-sink blend that includes Merlot, Zinfandel, Carignane, Petite Sirah and Syrah.

Savvy consumers know to look for the Estancia label for value, and for \$12 the 2008 Merlot doesn't disappoint. Likewise, the relative newcomer Two Angels delivers a winning Merlot from the Sonoma side of the Mayacamas Mountains.

Of the collectible reds, Switchback Ridge has the largest production, but that doesn't mean it will be easy to find. It's sleek yet intensely structured; no surprise, since Robert Foley is the winemaker behind it. Winemaker Mia Klein has proven she knows Merlot, and her Selene 2008 is a knockout. For a combination of grace and power, look no further than Etude GBR Grace Benoist Ranch Carneros 2007.

Finally, there's Realm Tempest 2007, a Merlot-based blend from Napa Valley that could fool you that it's from France.

SWITCHBACK RIDGE Merlot Napa Valley Peterson Family Vineyard 2007 Score: 93 | \$56

Luscious, sleek and complex, with floral red currant and Asian spice aromas that lead to layered, concentrated flavors of black cherry, white pepper and sweet cinnamon oak. Drink now through 2016. 1,128 cases made. —*T.F.*

SELENE Merlot Napa Valley Frediani Vineyard 2008 Score: 92 | \$35

Sleek yet layered and complex, with rich aromas of red currant and toasty mocha, followed by lush flavors of black cherry and spicy, toasty oak, with hints of roasted herb and cedar. Tannins sneak in on the finish. Drink now through 2016. 378 cases made. —*T.F.*

ETUDE GBR Grace Benoist Ranch Carneros 2007 Score: 91 | \$60

Rich, layered and concentrated, with currant and mocha oak aromas and dense blackberry, espresso and tomato leaf flavors that finish with firm but ripe tannins. Merlot and Malbec. Drink now through 2016. 636 cases made. —*T.F.*

D-CUBED CELLARS Zinfandel Napa Valley 2007 Score: 90 | \$27

A lively, zesty Zinfandel, with wild berry and roasted sage aromas and supple, jammy raspberry, cinnamon and spice flavors. Drink now through 2015. 976 cases made. —*T.F.*

NOVY Zinfandel Russian River Valley 2008 Score: 90 | \$19

Jammy and packed with zesty fruit, offering vibrant aromas of blueberry and raspberry that lead to compelling flavors of black cherry, smoky sage and black pepper. Drink now through 2013. 196 cases made. —*T.F.*

REALM The Tempest Napa Valley 2007 Score: 90 | \$75

Almost Pomerol-like (fans of the plush California style of Merlot may not approve), but still appealing for its notes of earthy clay, olive and lead pencil and how it balances rich fruit with loamy acidity. Offers dense and complex black cherry and blackberry aromas and flavors, finishing with firm, almost chewy tannins. No hurry. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Best from 2012 through 2016. 290 cases made. —*T.F.*

KOKOMO Cuvée 4791 Dry Creek Valley 2008 Score: 89 | \$22

Sleek and nicely balanced, with bright raspberry and red currant fruit and supple layers of toasty cinnamon, Asian spice and dried sage. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Carignane, Petite Sirah and Syrah. Drink now through 2014. 1,900 cases made. —*T.F.*

BIANCHI Zinfandel Paso Robles Zen Ranch Heritage Selection 2007 Score: 88 | \$26

Briary and appealingly rustic, with wild berry and spicy loam aromas and zesty huckleberry, river rock and anise flavors. Drink now through 2015. 1,031 cases made. —*T.F.*

PAUL DOLAN Zinfandel Mendocino County 2007 Score: 88 | \$25

Bright and lively, with cherry, anise and fresh clay aromas that lead to crisp, appealingly layered tart plum and spicy cedar

flavors. Drink now through 2015. 2,925 cases made. —*T.F.*

ESTANCIA Merlot Central Coast Keyes Canyon Ranches 2008 Score: 86 | \$12

Modest in scale, but appealing for its black cherry, herb and spice notes. Drink now through 2014. 65,000 cases made. —*T.F.*

TWO ANGELS Merlot Sonoma Valley Angel's Secret Mayacamas Mountains 2007 Score: 86 | \$17

Soundly made, with decent structure and firm tannins, plus notes of red currant, tomato leaf and spice. Drink now through 2013. 784 cases made. —*T.F.*

PERRY CREEK Zinfandel El Dorado Zinman 2007 Score: 85 | \$14

Ripe and jammy sweet, with baked berry pie aromas and flavors plus notes of spice and anise. Drink now through 2014. 5,000 cases made. —*T.F.*