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13 Marvelous Merlots from California New reviews of 2008s from Napa and beyond, plus a promising 2009

Tim Fish

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Tasting Highlights bring the best of the past week's tastings of California wines to WineSpectator.com members.

Among California Merlots, the 2008 vintage is dominating retail shelves right now, and my best advice is to shop carefully. It was a tough year, with a killer frost in the spring and a heat wave in May just when the Merlot was blooming. On top of that, rampant grass fires during the summer left some wines with a distinct smoke taint.

That's the bad news. As for the good news, there are many outstanding 2008s for savvy consumers. Some of the best 2008s such as Carter Truchard Vineyards, Krupp Brothers Stagecoach Vineyard and Etude Grace Benoist Ranch are built for the cellar.

You'll also find many sleek and supple Merlots that are ready to drink now but will improve with age, including Shafer, Switchback Ridge and Patel.

There's only one 2009 in this group, the complex and layered Tamber Bey, but it shows that the vintage has promise. I'll be tasting more of the '09s in the coming weeks.

CARTER Merlot Napa Valley Truchard Vineyards 2008 Score: 92 | \$65

Offers pinpoint focus and complexity, with aromas of currant and toasty cedar that lead to concentrated flavors of plum, espresso and river stone. The tannins are big and tight, but ripe. Needs time. Best from 2013 through 2017. 162 cases made. —*T.F.*

ETUDE GBR Grace Benoist Ranch Carneros 2008 Score: 92 | \$60

Firm and focused, with black currant and loamy cedar aromas that lead to densely structured flavors of cherry, espresso and anise, finishing with youthful tannins. Merlot and Malbec. Best from 2013 through 2018. 1,000 cases made. —*T.F.*

SHAFER Merlot Napa Valley 2008 Score: 92 | \$48

Elegant and focused, with black cherry and toasty oak aromas that lead to supple red currant, spice and herb notes. Finishes with firm but ripe tannins. Drink now through 2016. 7,200 cases made. —*T.F.*

SWITCHBACK RIDGE Merlot Napa Valley Peterson Family Vineyard 2008 Score: 92 | \$56

Sleek and supple, yet complex and intense, with fleshy black cherry and toasty mocha aromas that lead to flavors of Asian spice and red currant. The tannins are bold but ripe. Drink now through 2016. 620 cases made. —*T.F.*

KRUPP BROTHERS Merlot Napa Valley Stagecoach Vineyard 2007 Score: 91 | \$70



Carter made a focused, complex 2008 Merlot from the Truchard vineyards in Napa Valley.

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Dense and a bit racy, showing polished black cherry and spicy oak aromas, with layered currant, espresso and dusty cedar flavors that finish with firm tannins. Best from 2013 through 2017. 525 cases made. —*T.F.*

PATEL Napa Valley 2008 Score: 91 | \$50

A silky texture wraps around a firm and complex backbone. Aromas of currant and smoky oak lead to rich, sleek flavors of black cherry, mocha and spicy mineral. The tannins gain momentum on the finish. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Petit Verdot. Best from 2013 through 2017. 101 cases made. —*T.F.*

PLUMPJACK Merlot Napa Valley 2008 Score: 91 | \$50

A big and brawny Merlot, with currant and spicy espresso aromas and deeply structured plum, raspberry and mocha-tinged oak flavors that finish with ripe but muscular tannins. Best from 2012 through 2017. 2,137 cases made. —*T.F.*

ROCCA Merlot Yountville Grigsby Vineyard 2008 Score: 91 | \$45

Focused and a bit tight, with red currant and tomato leaf aromas and well-structured cherry, dill and cedar flavors that finish with dusty tannins. Drink now through 2016. 198 cases made. —*T.F.*

O'BRIEN ESTATE Merlot Napa Valley 2008 Score: 90 | \$44

Rich and focused, with red currant and tomato leaf aromas and complex mocha, plum and spicy toast flavors that finish with a burst of succulent fruit, but also tight tannins. Drink now through 2017. 300 cases made. —*T.F.*

SEAVEY Merlot Napa Valley 2008 Score: 90 | \$45

Sleek and focused, with bright red currant and tomato leaf aromas and flavors that balance density with elegance, plus notes of black cherry, toasty loam and pepper. Ripe tannins tighten the finish. Best from 2012 through 2017. 221 cases made. —*T.F.*

TAMBER BEY Merlot Yountville Deux Chevaux Vineyard 2009 Score: 90 | \$65

Dense and layered, with aromas of red currant and mint and firm flavors of tart red plum, cedar and herbs that finish with mineral-laced tannins. Needs time. Best after 2012. 150 cases made. —*T.F.*

BRAVANTE Merlot Howell Mountain 2008 Score: 89 | \$60

Tightly wound, but offers the goods, with black currant and loamy herb aromas and blackberry, espresso and earth flavors that linger toward ripe but burly tannins. Best from 2013 through 2017. 315 cases made. —*T.F.*

ENVY Bee Bee's Blend Calistoga 2008 Score: 89 | \$48

Focused and appealing, with notes of cherry, spice and cedar and just enough complexity and tannins to keep this interesting. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah. Drink now through 2015. 316 cases made. —*T.F.*

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