

Make Mine Merlot

By Guy Bower, host of The Good Life radio show on KNSS.

I love Merlot. It's one of the most popular red wines in the world and the USA's second favorite after Cabernet. Merlot is easy drinking with soft tannins. Do not take that to mean it's a sophomore red wine for novices!

Merlot's soft, sensual texture and approachable style, is made from red-skinned grapes that can adapt to a variety of climates to produce food-friendly wines in many price points. Merlot can be velvety and plummy, or rich and oaky. There's something for everyone, which is why Merlot is one of my favorites.

Merlot was made famous in the Bordeaux region of France where it is primarily used as a blending grape. Bordeaux, which is divided in to "Left Bank and Right Bank" referring to which side of the

Gironde estuary a wine is produced. The Left Bank produces wines with Cabernet as the prominent variety. Conversely Right Bank wines are dominated by Merlot.

Merlot was imported and planted in California in the 1850s; only a few acres existed after Repeal. It was included in the California planting boom of the 1970s, and plantings soared after 1987. Merlot was initially used as a blending variety as it was used in France.

I have fond memories of the first time Merlot appeared on the shelves as a single variety here in Kansas. One of the first 100% Merlots I enjoyed was produced not from California but from Washington's Columbia Winery by winemaker David Lake.

Founded in 1962 by a visionary group of 10 friends, six of whom were University of Washington professors, Columbia Winery is the result of the unrelenting commitment to proving the potential of winegrowing in the Columbia Valley.

In 1979, Master of Wine David Lake was named head winemaker and furthered the curious spirit that was fostered under the leadership of the founders. Under Lake, Columbia Winery produced the first series of vineyard-designate wines and the first Pinot Gris, Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet Franc

wines in Washington.

In 1991 I had the privilege of doing one of my first live phone interviews with Mr. Lake on my radio show. He was on a newfangled cell phone at the top of Red Willow vineyard to enhance cell signal.

Red Willow is a grape-growing estate located in the far western end of Yakima Valley AVA and was one of Mr. Lake's favorites. We spoke of his wines, especially his Merlot. The vineyard still thrives despite David Lake's passing in 2009.

As the winemaker for Columbia Winery for 26 years and a true "father of Washington winemaking" he would be proud of Columbia Winery today.

Columbia Winery Merlot made by current winemaker Sean Hails is a classic. Sourced from select Columbia Valley vineyards, this wine opens with hallmark dark purple color and enticing aromas of plum, clove and baking spice. On the fruit-forward palate, dark fruit flavors of black cherry, wild blackberry and juicy plum are met with pronounced notes of sweet oak, vanilla and hints of mocha for a silky, textured mouthfeel. Notes of ripe raspberry and caramel linger on the generous finish.

I hope you'll try this Merlot or others and continue to enjoy...

The Good Life!

In addition to hosting The Good Life on KNSS; Guy is a Level-1 Sommelier and teaches Wine Appreciation classes at WSU. He founded the Wichita Chapter of The American Institute of Wine & Food and was instrumental in starting both the Midwest Winefest and the Midwest Beerfest.

Enjoy The Good Life every Saturday on KNSS 1330/98.7, Noon - 1:00 p.m. CST

Visit www.GoodLifeGuy.com to learn more.

