

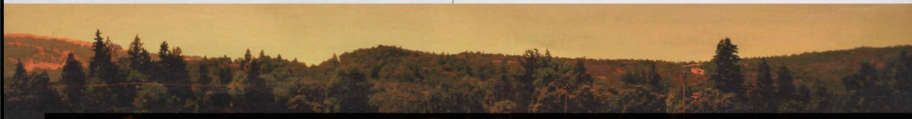
Wine Spectator

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MERLOT'S MIXED BAG

Vintners faced challenging conditions to deliver quality in 2008

BY TIM FISH



Tim Fish's Recommended California Merlots

TOP WINES

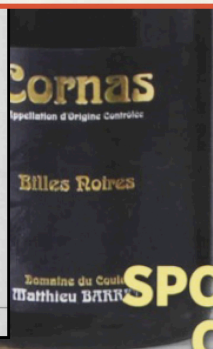
WINE	SCORE	PRICE
HOURGLASS Merlot Napa Valley Blueline Vineyard 2008 A sleek and plush Merlot, yet layered with delicate complexity.	93	\$75

every winemaker had the skill or resources to make top-tier Merlot. Since my last report on the variety ("Merlot's Perfect Timing," Nov. 30, 2010), I have blind-tasted more than 120 new releases from multiple vintages in our Napa office, with 26 wines rating an outstanding 90 points or higher on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/113011.)

Two wines topped the list with 94 points, and both are Merlot-dominant blends. Pride's Claret Reserve Sonoma-Napa Counties 2007 (\$125) is lush and complex, with red currant and toasty, bitter mocha aromas that lead to layered flavors of black raspberry,

Alpha Omega Proprietary Red Napa Valley 2008 (90) is rich and creamy; the sleek Hourglass Napa Valley Blueline Vineyard 2008 (\$75) shows delicate complexity; the Paloma Spring Mountain District 2008 (\$54) is supple and plush; and the Moone-Tsai Howell Mountain 2008 (\$65) offers depth and focus. The latter wine, crafted by Philippe Melka, hails from a new partnership between MaryAnn and Larry Tsai and California wine veteran Mike Moone.

"Tannin management was really important in 2008," says Melka, who was also responsible for the Melka Métrisse La Mekerra Vineyard Knights Valley 2007 (92 points, \$125) and Seavey Merlot Napa Valley 2008 (90, \$45). "Because the berries were very small,



SPOTLIGHT ON CÔTE-RÔT