



SIDEWAYS & UPWARDS

Its anti-Merlot, pro-Pinot message arguably did more to change the wine-drinking landscape than anything since *Parker Points*. But now, 10 years after *Sideways*, **Anne Krebiehl** asks whether the world is starting to rethink its attitude to Merlot

'I am not drinking any f***ing Merlot!' This is the exclamation that punctured an over-inflated bubble of Merlot consumption as it flickered across countless American silver screens a decade ago. The film, celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2014, is *Sideways*, of course.

Its protagonist is Miles, a Pinot-loving, downbeat divorcee taking his friend on a stag trip to California wine country. Intended as a wry take on male midlife crisis, the movie turned out to be a much-misunderstood paean to Pinot Noir – relegating Merlot to seemingly eternal naffness and launching Pinot as

PHOTO: KOBAL COLLECTION

the sophisticated, go-to variety. It had a profound and lasting effect on wine consumption, plantings and sales. But now, 10 years on, is the world ready for a Merlot revival?

LOSING ITS COOL

Rex Pickett, on whose novel the screenplay is based, recalls: 'By the late 1990s, Merlot was considered a joke by the wine cognoscenti. Sure, they would drink a Pétus, but in general it was synonymous with cheap supermarket swill. When I wrote the line in 1999,

SIDEWAYS COINCIDED WITH A MASSIVE BOOM IN THE APPRECIATION, NOT TO MENTION CONSUMPTION, OF WINE IN THE US

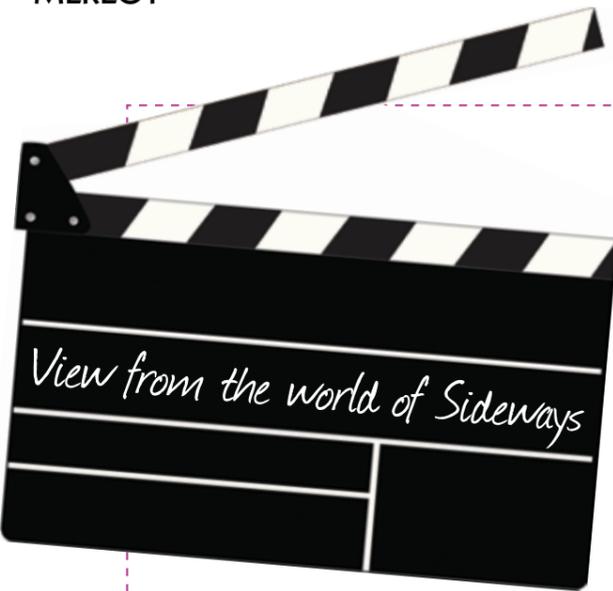
it wasn't hip to talk about Merlot. We knew there were some good Merlots, but it had become a joke long before the movie was released in 2004.'

Sam Hallak, general manager at London's The Palm Restaurant, worked as a sommelier in San Diego when the movie premiered and remembers: 'Merlot, which

was the most popular selling varietal by far, just dropped off and because of the way Miles spoke about Pinot Noir, sales went through the roof.'

Vanessa Cinti, head sommelier at Cut at

45 Park Lane, then also worked in the States and attests: 'It had a huge impact.' According to Ronald Plunkett, senior sommelier at Hakkasan in San Francisco, this is still felt today: 'I still get "I don't like Merlot"', he sighs. 'I still hear this frequently. I have even been asked by a customer why I list so many Merlots.' >>



MILES ON PINOT NOIR:

'It's a hard grape to grow... It's thin-skinned, temperamental, it ripens early, it's not a survivor like Cabernet which can just grow anywhere and thrive even when it's neglected. No, Pinot needs constant care and attention... Only the most patient and nurturing of growers can do it, really, somebody who really takes the time to understand Pinot's potential can then coax it into its fullest expression. And then, oh, its flavours are just the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and ancient on the planet.' (Screenplay by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor)

REX PICKETT (WRITER OF *SIDEWAYS*) ON WINE:

'You can never understand wine, which is why I fell in love with it. I also liked the poetry and the lyricism, even when it's hyperbolic and downright ludicrous at times. I love how something like a fermented grape could produce such rapturous expressions of exultation, or not. There are so many different grapes, so many regions, and just when you think you have a bit of a handle on it, a new vintage brings a whole new set of variables and things to learn. It's bottomless, really. You can never master it. And speciousness and fakery are pandemic in that world!'

Mark Andrew, senior buyer at Roberson Wine, is quick to point out that 'the impact *Sideways* had in the States was as much about perfect timing as it was about the content. It coincided with a massive boom in the appreciation, not to mention consumption, of wine in the US, of people's consciousness of different grape varieties and varieties as marketing tools'. While the impact was nowhere near as dramatic over here, Andrew thinks of it as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy: Once something starts to move, people believe it's a phenomenon. Merchants then start prioritising Pinot over Merlot, it takes on a life of its own, whether or not the customer intrinsically values Merlot over Pinot'.

THE GREATER GOOD?

Plantings of Merlot in California fell by 15% from 2004 to 2012 while Pinot Noir plantings increased by 58%. It hit producers hard, but Alex Ryan, president and CEO of California's most iconic Merlot-maker Duckhorn, thinks it was necessary at the time: '*Sideways* was the best thing ever to happen to Merlot-dominant California. It marginalised Merlot when it was under explosive growth and people began to plant in unsuitable areas with really speculative intentions.

'It became overplanted and a commodity and that doesn't do the

variety justice. It forced those growers and wineries who just jumped on a bandwagon to get off, and those maintaining the highest standards to show the attributes of Merlot to the world, to make sure the variety was planted in the right appellations and circumstances. I think it cleaned house, if you will, and forced the remainder of us to make a better Merlot.'

He concedes, however, that Merlot

'NOT ONLY DO I THINK THAT MERLOT IS DUE FOR A REVIVAL – I BELIEVE THAT IT IS ALREADY HAPPENING' RONALD PLUNKETT

often has the wrong image: 'I think to make iconic, world-class Merlots that rival great Cabernets, there's really a small selection of areas: Pomerol, St-Émilion, Napa and Washington. However, it's a pretty malleable and forgiving grape, so to make an average or just good-quality value Merlot, you have a wide range of places to make it, and that's probably a dilemma.'

SOMETHING MISSING

Pinot Noir is not quite suited to such entry-level exploitation but there certainly also is a smaller Pinot bandwagon: under Californian wine law, a varietally-labelled Pinot can contain up to 25% (really!) of other varieties to bulk up body

and colour and it has been said that many Californian exponents were missing 'true Pinot-ness'.

LEARNING CURVE

Yet Ryan, who via Goldeneye in cool Anderson Valley is also involved in Pinot Noir production, believes 'the West Coast has learned exponential amounts about the making of great Pinot Noir, and so the quality has risen probably more so than the volume'.

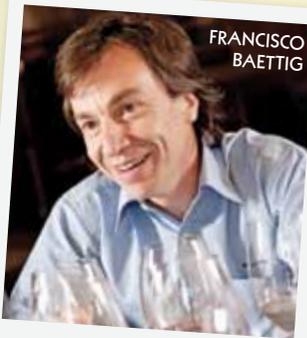
Hallak agrees that *Sideways* meant 'everyone started making Pinot, even those who had no business making it', but is convinced that 'in the long term, it sped up the development of Pinot in California'.

Indeed, the Golden State's long coastline boasts some of the world's most Pinot Noir-suited spots, producing wines that can proudly claim their place in the world's Pinot-pantheon. At steakhouse MASH, head sommelier Christian Jacobsen reports that 'people still don't go in for Merlot but the reason I have so few compared to Pinot is that Pinot is a terroir-driven grape. It makes sense to have all these different Californians'. Jacobsen's list celebrates California's Pinot diversity with 60-plus bins and there is no denying that anyone could wax as lyrical about them as Miles in the movie.

For now, the balance is still weighted in favour of Pinot Noir, both Stateside and

MEANWHILE, SOMEWHERE WEST OF THE ANDES

What effect did *Sideways* have in Merlot's New World homeland of Chile?



FRANCISCO
BAETTIG

In Chile, Merlot plantings have decreased by 22% since 2004, though this may just represent more 'Merlot' vines being reclassified as Carmenère. Pinot plantings doubled, albeit from a small base. While Pinot may have the diva reputation and the column inches, just as Alex Ryan hinted, world-class Merlot is a tough call.

But Chile is working on that. Francisco Baettig, winemaker for Viña Errázuriz says: 'In Chile we initially thought Merlot was an easy varietal, when in fact it's challenging. It has a small root system, so it tends to dehydrate easily. It took some time to understand Merlot. In order to make a good one you need clay soil that retains moisture; you need rootstocks with bigger root systems and better clones. All of that is just happening and the best quality Merlot in Chile today comes from very old vines that have been grafted to Merlot: their root systems are developed and usually planted in areas that are not too hot. So far Merlot has worked mainly at the entry level, but our work is not done in premium Merlot.'

Felipe Tosso of Viña Ventisquero agrees that Chile has entry-level Merlot down to a fine art: 'Merlot is a quite complicated variety. The good places for Merlot in the world are very few. Having said that, we still sell more Merlot than Pinot Noir because it's more popular, people don't talk about it but still drink a lot of it.' Indeed, Chile's 2012 harvest report states that 11.9% of the total crush was Merlot, compared to 2.3% of Pinot Noir.

But Tosso also works on premium Merlot: 'We do have a Merlot project that we planted seven years ago, it's in the coastal area of Colchagua, on a hillside; cool but not super-cool. There's clay soil with granite and very good drainage and we produce a super Merlot. It's still super young but in the next two, three years it will be very interesting. When it's right, Merlot is beautiful, but it takes a lot to make it right.'



FELIPE TOSSO

here. Merlot's Cinderella status, according to James Doidge, managing director of California-specialist Wine Treasury, is also due to California's identification with Cabernet Sauvignon. Whereas there are numerous iconic Cabernet and Pinot names, there are very few Merlot icons, with Duckhorn's Three Palms Vineyard being the pinnacle: a wine that beguiles with truffle and plum magic, especially with bottle age.

In spite of this, Doidge says that Wine Treasury 'actually [sells] more Duckhorn Cabernet than Merlot and this predates *Sideways*. I wouldn't say that Merlot declined particularly, I would say that it never quite had parity with Cabernet'. However, Doidge is sanguine: 'Merlot sales have certainly not declined, in fact we've taken on two more Merlots.'

So is Merlot due for a comeback? 'Not only do I think Merlot is due for a revival – I believe it is already happening,' says Plunkett in San Francisco, citing the grape's value for money as a reason. 'I can get an exceptionally well made Merlot from Napa or Sonoma from an amazing producer for a fraction of the cost of a Cabernet.'

RED REVIVAL

Jacobsen thinks a revival 'will take time', but Cinti at Cut declares that she 'recently fell in love with Merlot again'. Those who make it now, she says, are 'really good wineries that really care about Merlot and really love the grape. Wines like Doidge's Twomey Merlot are really well made and just what Merlot should be: round, juicy, not too much tannin. People love it. They kind of forgot this grape and when they taste it they rediscover it and are very happy.'

Certainly, many sommeliers I talked to for this article praised the grape for its approachability and versatility. But let's leave the final word to Chris Cavaille, general manager at Wild Honey restaurant, who is fulsome in his praise of the Twomey Merlot: 'It's such an elegant and well-balanced wine, you can drink it even with white meat. It's a great alternative to Bordeaux, and to be honest, far better than a lot of them.'

Perhaps even Miles himself would have to agree with that. 🍷