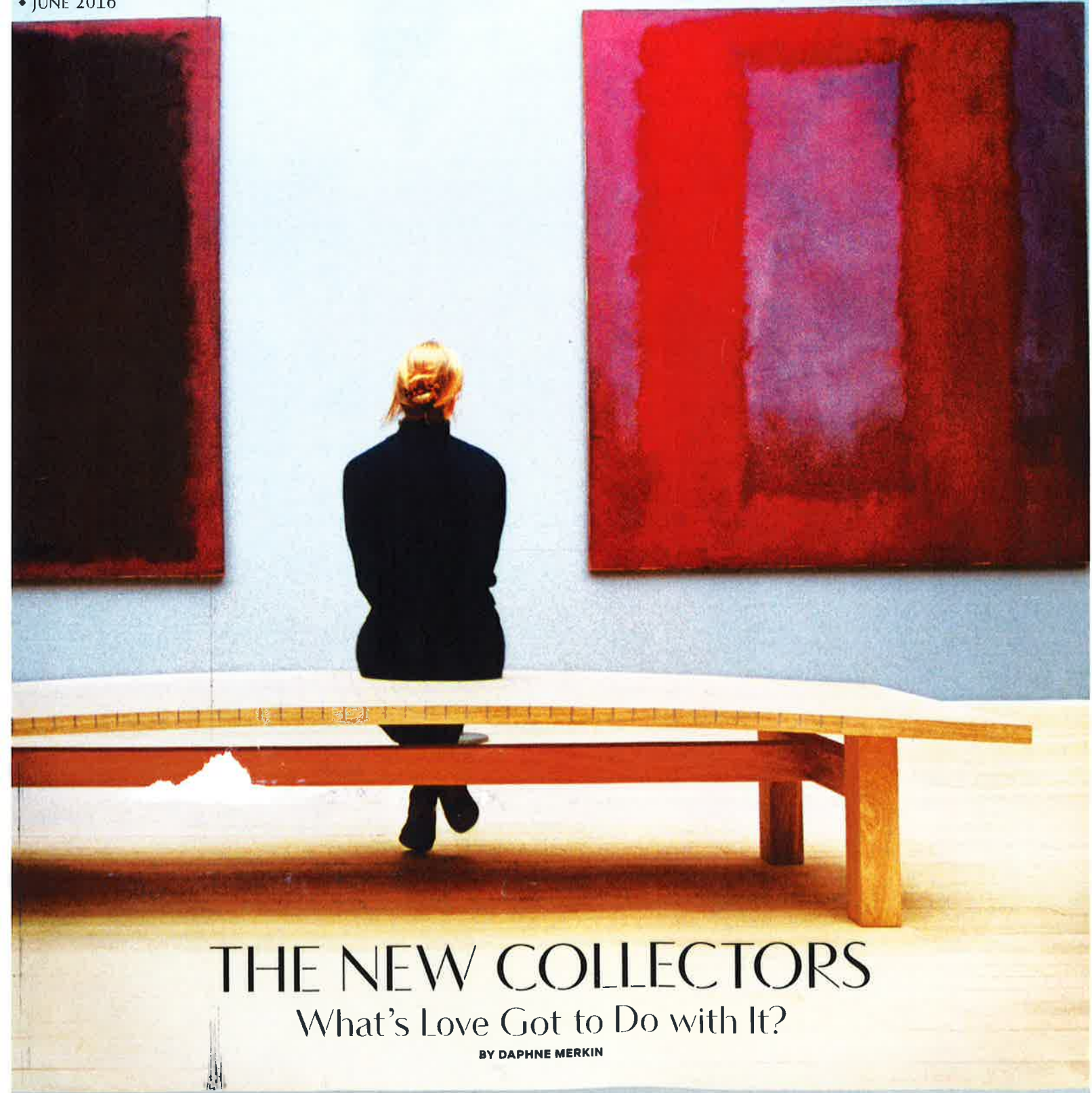


THE CULTURE ISSUE

DEPARTURES

◆ JUNE 2016



THE NEW COLLECTORS

What's Love Got to Do with It?

BY DAPHNE MERKIN

UNCORKED

The True Wine Lover's "Merlot" Grenache

For a bottle that's easily approachable and has plenty of fruit, but also real character, take a hard look at this red grape. **BY COLMAN ANDREWS**

I'm here with a simple message for red-wine lovers. The next time you're tempted to reach for Merlot, get a little wild and crazy: Choose Grenache instead. Merlot is a great wine grape. It is the most widely planted variety in Bordeaux—it probably originated there—and goes into virtually all the region's famous reds. (Current vintages of Château Pétrus, 100 percent Merlot, sell for up to \$4,300.) It also yields superb wines in California, Washington, Australia, Italy, and elsewhere.

It isn't all good stuff, though. A lot of the less expensive Merlot is blowsy, unidimensional wine whose greatest virtue is its so-called accessibility, defined by sweet fruit and palate softness that stems from a lack of tannin or acidity. That's a nice way of saying it falls flat. It's a food-pairing favorite since it "goes with everything"—because it doesn't have enough character not to. Some dismiss it as "red Chardonnay," meaning it's a boring choice favored by people who probably don't much care what they drink.

If you care about what you drink, get thee to Grenache. It has similarities to Merlot. Tasters find suggestions of raspberry in both—though strawberry is more common in Grenache—and sometimes a whiff of something like tobacco and/or wood smoke. Both wines typically have midrange tannins and acidity, and are rarely vinified with excessive oak. They can be enjoyed young, though they also have aging potential.

That's not to say that Grenache tastes like Merlot, or that all Grenache is worth drinking. But the better examples are as accessible as Merlot and have better definition and sharper focus, along with what is described as a "pretty" flavor. Imagine strawberry (or raspberry) sharpened just a little by something like lemon zest and dusted with something aromatic,



BOTTLE TO BUY

**M. Chapoutier Barbe Rac
Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2012**
Rhône Valley, France

A suave, almost silky wine with a spicy nose hinting at cinnamon, cardamom, and black pepper, followed by a flavor of cherry preserves and a bit of chocolate that seems to stretch on forever. \$145; chapoutier.com.

like, hmm, could that be cinnamon? That's textbook Grenache.

Grenache was probably born in Spain—Sardinia, where it's called Cannonau, also makes a claim—and there it is widely planted under the name Garnacha (or Garnatxa). A large portion of the world's Grenache, though, grows in France, specifically in the Rhône Valley, Provence, and the Languedoc-Roussillon region. In Australia, it's used in Rhône-inspired "GSM" blends—Grenache, Shiraz (Syrah), and Mourvèdre—and California's Rhone Rangers use it similarly or bottle it separately.

In California, there are 44,000-plus acres of Merlot, while Grenache has shrunk to about 6,000 acres. Merlot became so popular not just because consumers liked it but also because

winemakers did. Why? I asked a Napa Valley vintner, whose enterprise was launched with Merlot. "Real quick turnaround," he said. "I planted it for cash."

Merlot vines mature faster than other kinds, and the grapes ripen earlier, allowing producers to stagger harvests and to get wine into bottles quickly. Grenache, on the other hand, can be a problem child. It ripens late and typically takes a while to settle in the bottle. If Merlot seems flabby and ill-defined, Grenache can end up thin, sharp, and too high in alcohol.

But there's that wonderful flavor—that weave of berries, citrus, and spice, that prettiness. These same qualities make Grenache an attractive challenge to winemakers who bottle it as a single varietal. One of the most celebrated was the late Jacques Reynaud. His Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Château Rayas, was 100 percent Grenache. (His heirs concentrate on Grenache in that and a second wine, Pignan.)

The late Greg Brown of T-Vine Cellars, in the Napa Valley, was a poet of Grenache, making wines that combined heft with charm. Steve Beckmen at Santa Barbara County's Beckmen Vineyards has half a dozen or so different bottlings, while Eric Mohseni at nearby Zaca Mesa uses it in a smoky, earthy red. In the Santa Cruz Mountains, Randall Grahm makes both light, aromatic Grenache and more full-bodied stuff that recalls the product of the Provençal hills.

Some of the best red-wine bargains of any kind today are Garnachas from Spain, most under \$20. Look for names like Bodegas Borsao, Espelt, Las Rocas, Bodegas Breca, Vega Sindoa, and Campos de Luz. These are big, generous, easy-to-drink wines, and there's not a Merlot for less than 20 bucks in all creation that can come close to them in terms of the seductive aromas and lively flavors that true wine lovers seek. ♦