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# NAPA'S MERLOT MAGIC

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An impressive debut release leads a strong  
pack of wines from 2002 BY TIM FISH

**N**apa Valley has long been king of the hill when it comes to California Merlot. And with a surprisingly strong roster of releases from the 2002 vintage, that position has become virtually unassailable.

Consider, for example, the remarkable debut of Bruce and Robin Ahnfeldt's Merlot Napa Valley 2002. At 94 points (\$35), it hits a high-water mark for 2002 California Merlot. "We didn't want a wimpy, watered-down Merlot," Bruce Ahnfeldt says.

The concentrated wine, crafted by veteran winemaker Craig MacLean, manages to be smooth and rich on the palate. It's the

sort of Merlot that Napa is producing with increasing success, but the Ahnfeldt Merlot won't be easy to find—only 120 cases were made. The grapes come from the couple's 8-year-old vineyard, located just northeast of the city of Napa. While the Ahnfeldts are longtime growers, the 2002 vintage marks their first wine release.

Since last year's California Merlot report, *Wine Spectator* editors have tasted nearly 200 Merlots. Slightly more than half are from the 2002 vintage; the rest are early arrivals from 2003 and stragglers from 2001. There is no shortage of stars among the 2002 Napa Merlots—about 27 percent of the wines rate 90 points or higher.