

# Reassessing Merlot 10 years after 'Sideways'

By Chris Macias, Sacramento Bee

The words were like a corkscrew through the heart of a signature wine grape.

"If anyone orders Merlot, I'm leaving. I am not drinking any (bleeping) Merlot!"

This seeing-red meltdown might be the second most famous movie line about wine (the top prize has to go to Hannibal Lecter and his Chianti). And it was 10 years ago this fall that moviegoers first heard Paul Giamatti's Miles utter it in "Sideways," a film that would go on to earn more than \$100 million at the global box office, five Oscar nominations and a win for best adapted screenplay.

But this infamous Merlot diss became more than just a memorable quote from the road-trip dramedy that mixed Santa Barbara County's bucolic wine country with a mighty mid-life crisis. Miles' anti-Merlot rant seemed to cause ripples in the wine marketplace, a phenomenon studied in a 2008 paper called "The Sideways Effect: A Test for Changes in the Demand for Merlot and Pinot Noir Wines."

This research team was headed by Steven Cuellar, an economics professor at Sonoma State University. The study found that national grocery store sales of Merlot fell 1.4 percent each year after 2005, though its decline had been underway for a few years prior.

Meanwhile, sales for Miles' preferred Pinot Noir skyrocketed in the months after the movie's 2004 release, to the tune of a 16 percent sales spike, according to an A.C. Nielsen analysis.

Nevertheless, a decade after the film's release, Merlot still ranks as one of the country's most popular wines.

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