



Hoping to stick up for merlot after "it took such a beating in 'Sideways,'" Rudy McClain has filmed an ode to the varietal, "Merlove."

'MERLOVE'

Is it time to love merlot again?

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When a rumor surfaced about a new film project focusing on merlot, Rudy McClain hurriedly checked it out.

Discovering the rumor to be unfounded, McClain, a screenwriter, decided to take on the project himself.

Incorporating interviews, scenes, chats, winemaking and lots of sniffing and swirling on both sides of the Atlantic, "Merlove" will receive its world premiere at Copia Friday night.

In explaining his film and its message, McClain says ultimately that enjoyment of merlot amounts to a person's "love of wine, and the love of wine, ultimately, is an expression of one's love of life."

McClain admits that he wanted to stick up for merlot after the grape variety took such a beating in the popular film, "Sideways."

"I'm not trying to say merlot is the best varietal either. Merlot is just one of the family and, like any family, some members have strengths and weaknesses. The message of 'Merlove' is that no single grape varietal should be sin-

gled out as superior or inferior to others.

"We want people to know that merlot is ready to be loved again by all. Remember that every vintage has a new story to tell."

McClain has invited his premiere audience to sit back and enjoy the "under two hour" documentary, interwoven "with the animation of a bottle of merlot wine named 'Merlove' who must find a way to fill itself with love when aimlessly tossed into the ocean of mediocre merlot wine."

He came up with the film title while driving with his girlfriend, Marisol Ramirez, who's associate producer and helped with film research. "I was thinking that you've got to have a love for merlot and, hey, that was it," he recalls. "I learned the domain name merlove.com, was available so the decision was easy."

The filmmaker launched his effort here, initially interviewing Swanson Vineyards winemaker Chris Phelps and then many others who could provide insight into working with merlot, including enologist Jean Claude Berrouet at Petrus in Pomerol. Other local opinions were sought, from the

likes of Tom Rinaldi, Andy Beckstoffer and Kurt Venge, as was wise counsel in Saint-Émilion from the ultimate industry consultant, Michel Rolland.

While he jokes that he "made the film to get out of the house," McClain does wax a bit philosophical about his project.

"The soil, the fruit, the winemaking — it's all a grand metaphor for life. Understanding wine is understanding life's lessons, about everything, from greed to love, and ultimately one's station in life.

"At the end of the day, wine like life is a personal adventure."

A sold-out premiere

Featuring a tasting of merlots from Markham Vineyards and Kelham Vineyards and Winery, Friday night's screening is sold out. However, Copia has scheduled a second screening on Sept. 5.

McClain will be on hand at both screenings to conduct a question and answer session after the film is shown.

He's premiering it here because his roots are here. "And I want the opinion of locals," he hastily adds. "I want feedback from the indus-

try so that we can refine the film over the summer and submit it to festivals in the fall."

A native of Milwaukee, McClain is a member of a Napa Valley family that's farmed the land for more than a century. His mother, Beth Lincoln, was raised here, and a pair of uncles — respected viticulturist Jim Lincoln and Barrel Builders founder Phil Burton — have long been associated with the wine industry.

McClain settled in the valley as a fifth grader and is a graduate of St. Helena High School. He's a graduate of University of California Santa Barbara where he majored in black studies and psychology.

"Merlove" is the first feature length film for McClain, who's written screenplays for films that range in subject from sci-fi thriller to comedy.

Upbeat about the current project, he assures all that "Merlove" is "only the beginning for me."

For additional information about "Merlove," or to sign on as a backer of the project, log online at www.merlove.com.