



Achieving Excellence Through Blending

THERE WAS A time when the merits of single-vineyard versus blended wines were hotly debated. That argy-bargy seems to have thankfully cooled down, as there is plenty of room in the world for these two different approaches to happily coexist, even on the highest tiers of quality.

Blending is typically done once all lots have completed fermentation so that the winemaker can see what they have to work with. They can have many reasons for producing blends, but throwing one together with the leftovers of other bottlings just for the sake of making a product is the least justifiable. I recently tasted a disjointed mess made with Nebbiolo, Nerello Mascalese, Barbera, and Primitivo that suffered from an excess of acid and tannins, not to mention alcohol. This doesn't mean that lower-tier "everything but the kitchen sink" wines don't have their place, but wineries should market and price them accordingly. And they still need to be enjoyable: They can't be considered a good value if they're unpleasant.

Blending out faults is possible in some

cases: Elevated volatile acidity, for example, can be brought below the sensory threshold. But smoke taint does not blend away nearly as well. Humans are highly sensitive to it, so even a tiny amount can ruin an otherwise clean wine. Brettanomyces is also tricky; as with smoke taint, the spoilage can reveal itself more over time, making it hard to mitigate entirely during the winemaking process.

Blending done right is often about creating a harmonious balance. Sometimes the judicious addition of another component is all that is needed to lower a wine's alcohol level; smooth out its tannins; or reach a juicy, delicious degree of acidity. This is often preferable to adding tartaric acid, hiring a company to spin out excess alcohol, or bottling a wine with noticeable sweetness when dryness was the goal.

Knowing that certain vineyards and varieties will ripen ahead of others can be used to great advantage when crafting an intentionally blended wine. Sémillon, for its part, is a classic adjunct to Sauvignon

Blanc: In the vineyards I work with, it typically ripens at a lower Brix than Sauvignon Blanc and can thus be counted on to temper the alcohol of the final blend—a subtle tweak that makes all the difference.

Another approach is to pick a vineyard at varying stages of ripeness and blend the resulting lots to taste, producing superb complexity while maintaining a wine's single-vineyard status. This is especially successful for Chardonnay, which offers a wide range of characteristics as it ripens: bright acid and lower alcohol to start; green apple and pear in the middle; and ripe mango, pineapple, and a richer mouthfeel in the final stages. These components can be brought together to create something unique.

This is not to say that every expression benefits from blending, as some have a gorgeous linearity that would be a shame to lose. That said, it is arguably the most cohesive way to create a wine that wants for nothing. *sj*

