

The Press Democrat

Berger on wine: Field blends provide consistency

DAN BERGER | January 8, 2019

Most blended red wines vary radically from one to another. Most winemakers try to hit a particular style of wine that sells – and the current mode of the day for reds is big and bold, with lots of fruit intensity.

Subtlety and grace aren't in fashion; indeed they're the kiss of death.

When we see a bottle of a blended red wine, most of the time we have no idea what grapes were used to make it, so we know little of what to expect — except boldness. Often the region it was grown in also is no help. A "California" wine can come from any or all of 58 counties.

Winemakers use all sorts of techniques to make amorphous, unidentified mystery blends. Some use cheaper grapes that have little personality, but they know they can always blend in some overripe fruit, add some industry-invented concentrate, flavor it with oak substitutes (staves, chips, or other wood flavorings), and deliver a soft, occasionally sweet, liquid that has about as much connection to fine wine as a soap box derby racer has to a Ferrari.

All this is legal, of course. But can such a method make a wine worth \$25 to \$50 a bottle? I have almost never found one. Yet store shelves seem to be bulging with \$25 to \$50 unidentified red blends that are so unsatisfying I'm amazed people actually buy them. To me it's a scam.

This may be a manifestation of the times. We live in an era where headlines mention snake-oil salesmen like Charles Ponzi, Bernie Madoff, wine fraudster Rudi Kurniawan, sleazy politicians and corporate/investment scam artists.

Wineries have every right to make overpriced, oafish red wine blends. What amazes me is that millions of people are taken in and think price alone



determines the quality of these blends. Many are content with them because the phrase "blended red wine" seems to have some magical, hypnotic power in the marketplace.

But blends come in many forms, and one that has a kind of logic to it is the field blend. This is usually defined as a wine made from various grapes grown on a contiguous plot of soil, generally harvested at the same time, and which (from year to year) can be micromanaged by the winemaker based on what nature provided.

Most of these field blends don't change as radically from vintage to vintage as do blends of grapes from far-flung regions.

One winemaker told me he preferred grenache from Monterey County for his unidentified blend, "but if I can't get any, I can use zinfandel from Mendocino," he said, adding that some of his blends were better than others.

That may also be true for Bill and Betsy Nachbaur, but by using the same Russian River Valley Vineyard very year (called Alegría), their ACORN Winery wines retain approximately the same characteristics from year to year.

What's different about this project is that most ACORN wines don't appear to be blends at all. Almost every bottling is technically a varietal — so it has at least 75 percent of the named varietal.

Yet, all of ACORN's wines are also field blends, because that's how the Nachbaurs set up their vineyards after acquiring the Healdsburg-area property three decades ago.

Each grape variety was planted to add something to the largest plantings, Bill said, allowing most wines to be varietals. However, some varieties were selected for reasons that make no viticultural sense.

"In some cases, we just liked the name," said Bill, a former San Francisco attorney.

Among the 70 different grape varieties planted at Alegría are tannat, einsett, petit Bouschet, béclan, negrette, and trousseau — all of which go into his zinfandel (78 per-cent, albeit in small amounts. The zinfandel was originally planted in 1890.)

Field blends can be excellent values, especially if consumers buy them year after year and note both the similarities and differences.

Among the various field blends in the market are an excellent project called Sidebar by Sonoma County winemaker David Ramey. There is also Charles Mara's wine called "M", and the Dirty Pure Wine Project, which advertises that its "Bomb" wines are field blends.

There is also a company called Field Blend Selections, a New York-based importer of field-blended wines.

All ACORN wines are treated the way the top varietals are, aging like super-premium wines in French oak barrels for many months. Our Discovery this week is a superb example of ACORN's efforts.

Discovery of the Week:

2014 ACORN Medley, Russian River Valley, Alegría Vineyard (\$50):

Yes, it's priced at the higher end of the blended reds, but it's a splendid, savory and complete wine (24 percent zinfandel) that should work with a wide variety of foods because of its lower tannins and good acidity. The intriguing thing is that the wine has 17 percent of various muscats, which actually show up in the aroma. What a delightful find. Aging is optional.

It's so good now and for the next few years that it would be a shame to lose the fruit.

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