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February 9, 2019

WC 2019-Q1

Blending: The Trials of a Winemaker

Of all the tasks that a winemaker faces between harvest and bottling, none presents quite the combination of challenge and fun as the making of a blend. We use the word “trial” in two senses. Blending is a trial in the sense of being a challenge. However, this step in the winemaking process also involves doing extensive “blending trials” or small test batches, to arrive at the perfect combination of flavor components.

Since most of our wines are straight varietals from single vineyards, true blends are not something we do very often. Even with our varietal wines, though, there are trials involved. With every wine, we pull a sample from every single barrel in the lot. We then taste these individually and note the characteristics of each. Because we use a variety of different barrels, some samples have more subtle oak characteristics while some have more expressive fruit. Some are more tannic than others. We combine them in various ways, looking for an overall balance. Of course, logistics factor in as well; but if there is an inferior barrel, it doesn’t make the cut.

When we create a true blend, such as our Troubadour, well--then we get *really* excited. The three of us (Rich, Christine and Seth) turn into mad scientists, pulling out our flasks and pipettes, calculators and note pads. We usually pull Nicole or Chris into the fun, too, as it is helpful to have several educated palates on which to test our creations. Here we get to play with contrasting elements, such as the bright cherry of cabernet and the rich spice of shiraz, and work to find the most harmonious interaction.

This month’s club shipment is unusual and rather exciting, because we are including three different blends. We are really jazzed about releasing our long-anticipated Rhone-style blend, our 2016 GSM! We are also including our 2013 Syrah, El Dorado, which is actually a two-vineyard varietal blend with some interesting attributes. And finally, we are offering our new vintage of Troubadour—the 2014 vintage, which is tasting rich, well-structured and lovely—all the things we want to see in a Troubadour. Each blend has a story...so read on!

Included in your winter shipment:

2016 GSM (Grenache-Syrah-Mourvedre), Sierra Foothills (New release)

Avg. Harvest Brix: 25.9 pH: 3.75 TA: 4.6 Alc: 15.1% RS: 0.0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 207 Barrel age: 2 years in mostly neutral European oak Blend: 50/25/25

We are all very proud of the Grenache we produce at Cantiga; but ever since we made our first Grenache-Syrah blend in 2008, Seth and Christine have dreamt of producing a Grenache-Syrah-Mourvedre, which is a classic Côtes du Rhône blend. After years of twisting Rich’s arm, he finally agreed—so long as we didn’t use any of our precious Estate Grenache in the blend. He didn’t wish to give up doing our Grenache as a straight varietal.

In 2016, we were fortunate to source some wonderful Grenache fruit from Carmère, in Amador County. We also found some Syrah and Mourvedre at two different vineyards that we earmarked for the blend. After two years of aging these three lots of wine, we began to experiment with blending them. When determining proportions, we took some wisdom from the traditions of other wineries, particularly those in Southern France; for example, Grenache is typically the largest part of the blend, lending its lush strawberry character. A smaller percentage of Syrah adds depth, structure and color, while a similar percentage of Mourvedre contributes decadent spice, delicate rose petal characteristics and tannin. Ultimately, we relied on our palates to arrive at the optimal proportions for this blend, based on the wines we had. We went through a stunning number of blending trials on this one—our perfectionist natures wouldn’t let us settle for anything we weren’t entirely happy with.

The blend we finally arrived at was roughly 50% Grenache, 25% Syrah and 25% Mourvedre. This wine is like music in the mouth—there is so much going on! It is obviously a new one for us, but we predict that it will be fantastic with duck, pork tenderloin and wild game—and with roasted or grilled red meats. However, we would love for our club members to experiment with this wine and report back with any great food pairings you discover.

2013 Syrah, El Dorado (New release)

Avg. Harvest Brix: 25.2 pH: 3.90 TA: 5.5 Alc: 14.6% RS: 0.0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 205 Barrel age: 3 years, mostly neutral European oak

We included this lovely Syrah in a club shipment almost a year ago, and since then it has continued to mature and develop in complexity. It is showing some very interesting nuances! Rich refers to this vintage of Syrah as a “wine with an identity crisis.” As we mentioned, this is a cross-vineyard blend. The story behind this wine is that in 2013, we did an exploration of some new potential syrah sources. We purchased grapes from two different vineyards, one higher elevation vineyard in north Fair Play, and one slightly lower vineyard in south Fair Play. The higher elevation fruit had a little trouble ripening but had a lot of character. The lower elevation fruit was riper but lacked the intensity of the other fruit. Fortunately, when we put our mad scientist hats on and conducted trials, we found that the two lots complemented each other nicely in an 80:20 blend.

The most unique thing about this blend, though—and this is where the identity crisis comes in—is that we were never able to determine with certainty whether the lower elevation vineyard was French clone syrah or Australian clone shiraz. The owner was fairly certain the clone was Australian, but the shiraz characteristics were not very pronounced, in our opinion. However, as this blend has aged, we are detecting more and more pepper on the back end—a distinctly shiraz attribute. So this blend might actually be a syrah-shiraz! (Shall we call it a “shirah”?)

2014 “Troubadour,” El Dorado (New release)

Avg. Harvest Brix: 25.2 pH: 3.56 TA: 5.4 Alc: 14.8% RS: 0.0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 171 Barrel age: 3 years, mostly neutral European oak Blend: 60/40

Our classic Cab-Shiraz blend is the one blend we have offered fairly consistently since we first started the business. Our first few vintages were simply called Cabernet-Shiraz, but then after a few years, we rebranded this blend as “Troubadour.” Our first experimental batch of Troubadour actually used fruit from the 2002 vintage that had received extended aging in barrel. (A 2:1 blend, this is our favorite Troubadour to date.)

Our 2014 Troubadour was made with cabernet grapes from Sierra Oaks Vineyard here in Fair Play, and Shiraz grapes from Alfonso Elena who, on our recommendation, had planted his Fair Play vineyard with Australian shiraz cuttings from the same source as our vineyard. This particular vintage caused us a little consternation during the trials. It was not a vintage that “made itself.” Neither the cabernet nor the shiraz could stand alone. However, we discovered that a 3:2 blend brought out the best of each varietal, and the combination was exceptional.

After five years of aging (three years in barrel, two in bottle), we are very happy with this wine. This particular Troubadour is an example of how winemaking skill and patience come in to play to create a product that is greater than the sum of its parts. We hope you enjoy it!

Cheers, and many thanks!

Rich & Christine Rorden