



FOR TOO LONG VARIETAL COMPARTMENTALISATION has been fashionably logical in wine – a place for every grape and every grape in its place, no mingling allowed!

In many cases, single varietal wines are great wines and commercial successes. Pinot noir is pinot noir and needs no partner. Chardonnay or riesling as table wines are always the grand dame of the meal. But simplicity can be taken too far, a minimalism that leaves us with minimal personality.

My time spent lecturing and running tastings has shown that, on the whole, people prefer single varietal wines and distrust blends. Blends, even with their great history and unique flavour, are seen as a risky buy, being somehow inferior to single varietal wine. Bland tasting blends have given the genre a bad name. And many are made to a formula of price, blended in the winery, sold at the cheap end, and without distinctive flavour.

So why blend? Primarily to create wines that are better drinks, possessing more original flavours than their individual components. Many European blends capture the best of diverse vineyard or regional qualities. Collectively, they over deliver on flavour complexity and offer desirable and distinctive regional personalities. The most famous for their terrific sense of regional identity are Champagne and red Bordeaux with cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc. Other French classics are semillon sauvignon blanc and variant blends, or shiraz with viognier. Alsace steps up its complexity with gewurztraminer, riesling and pinot gris blends.

The Italian classics from the Austrian north are blends of riesling, gewurztraminer, tocai friulano, and pinot blanc (Mornington Peninsula's Quealy Pobblebonk captures the zeitgeist of those varietals).

In the south of Italy “field blends”, or “promiscuous plantings” as they were described to me in the 1980s, are more common. The term traditionally means multiple grape varieties are grown together, harvested together, crushed and co-fermented. The melding of flavours from the different grapes starts at the very beginning of the winemaking process – on the day the grapes are picked.

Today, a field blend is either a wine from different varieties harvested and fermented together, or the term is used more loosely to denote a wine where the grapes have been harvested, from the same vineyard, at the same time, individually fermented, and then blended.

Will we see more and better blends? I say yessiree. Our truly original Australian red wine landscape helps when it comes to blends, especially shiraz with cabernet, as well as enormous old vine quality when it comes to grenache shiraz mataro and its variant blends.

The interesting thrust comes from increasing the blend partners, so they gather in a riot reminiscent of a New York nightclub in the '80s. Most of us see the wine like a disco ball at the party, rather than the guests grapes or the dress code.

White field blends age much more slowly and tend to be at their best as two to five year old wines. Most importantly in both red and whites, the jigsaw puzzle of personalities delivers better texture, length of flavour and flavour complexity that changes during a meal.

McWilliams' Mount Henry is a blend of pinot noir and shiraz, and revives a wine from the Maurice O'Shea era. It capitalises on their block of 1928 planted pinot noir, one of the oldest in the world, as well as shiraz vines dating back to the 1880s.

In South Australia, Peter Lehmann had ideas on how to tame the power of Barossa shiraz and wines were produced with inclusions of white varieties like roussanne and riesling in the 1950s. Today varieties like viognier, roussanne, riesling and marsanne are all fair game as bed partners for the accommodating shiraz. White grape aromatics and their colourless tannins lift colour of reds to a more red purple, add floral top notes weaving increased fragrance and, while on the palate the tannin softness aligns with fresher and more perfumed flavours, making these great food wines.

Margaret River is doing amazing things blending cabernet with merlot, malbec, petite verdot and cabernet franc. Check out wines from producers Woodlands, Cullen and Pierro.

In Rutherglen, the Campbells bottle a red called The Sixties Block, a medium-bodied, spicy mash up of grapes including tempranillo, graciano, tinta cao, shiraz, souzao and carignan, all planted in a single row. This is a fabulous celebration of wine diversity displaying the uniqueness of place. It is the '60s Carnaby Street style with an Austin Powers point of view.

Field blends and blends of intellectual bed partners are one of a number of exciting new fronts opening up for winemakers exploring the taste of their place. Most good wine lists now feature a field blend or two. It's both a relief and a pleasure to see adventurous blending taking place within the wine industry. **RL**

top drops



Mount Mary 2012 Quintet (\$130, 92/100)

Cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, malbec, petit verdot. Takes me to Bordeaux in a good way. Very fine aromas of raspberry, redcurrant through blackcurrant fruits, and the violets of fine grown cabernet. In the mouth the red fruits are loose-limbed, supported by lean, fine-grained tannins.



Courabyra 2008 805 Sparkling White (\$45, 94/100)

Pinot noir, chardonnay, pinot meunier. Beautiful, luminous pale green gold colour. A complex lick of yeasty brioche toast, subtle pink grapefruit to just ripe pear aromas. As it lands in the mouth, the texture is very fine, gentle and creamy. Runs long and finishes with fresh apple flavours.



Centennial Bong Bong Quattro Bianco (\$18.99, 89/100)

Sauvignon blanc, pinot grigio, chardonnay, arneis. Pretty floral talc and rose floral with banana fragrance of apple spice and cinnamon. Middle palate weight and freshness and a touch of dryness. Good summer quaffing wine for hot days.



Bleasdale 2013 Frank Potts (\$32.99, 94/100)

Cabernet sauvignon, malbec, petit verdot, merlot. Oak elements are found in the waxy, white butter, flower petal and blueberry aromas. An exotic fruit palate, as per the aromas, and then structural elements drive in with oak tannins. Middle palate is stalky, with celery salt and cabernet. Red fruits linger to the finish.



Clonakilla 2012 Ballinderry (\$35, 90/100)

Cabernet sauvignon, cabernet, franc merlot. This wine has a bounce in its step with fresh raspberry and blackberry aromas and a herbal backdrop. It has well-defined ripeness, supple middle palate tannins and the acid runs the structure to the finish. Quite shy in 2014, it has the stamina to develop.



Philips Frolic 2015 Aura Pinot Meunier Rose (\$25, 92/100)

Made in the rose fashion. The wine has aromas of whole berry and bubble-gum pink jelly beans, rose petals and geraniums. A strawberry and raspberry finish means it will do great things with food, but serve chilled. Unique and a nice point of difference to other roses.

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