

Snow on Wine

A Red Blend by Any Other Name

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One advantage of being older is the perspective it brings. In the 1960's we knew that a cork on top and the name of a noble grape on the label (i.e. Merlot, Chardonnay, Cabernet sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel) indicated quality wine, and a screw top and a funky name (i.e. Hearty Burgundy, Mountain Chablis, Pisano, etc.) meant a cheap swig. That noble grape name was an indication of quality, but also told us how that wine would taste. But the back label often revealed the Cabernet Sauv was 20% Merlot, and the Zinfandel was 30% Petit Syrah, so there was blending even then. The named grape just had to be 70% or so (varying from state to state). How times have changed. Today's wine shelves boast rows of quality wine simply called "Red Blend," many with a screw top and few with any grape name on the label to suggest what kind of taste to expect.

As Andy Perdue and Eric Degerman of Great Northwest Wine point out in a Feb 6th article in our Spokesman-Review, Washington wine makers have somewhat mirrored "signature" regional grape blending traditions which developed in the "old world" from centuries or even millennia of wine making experience. So why all the blending? Because often a single grape may produce an incomplete or poorly balanced wine. For instance, Cabernet Sauv from some vineyards may be too tannic, harsh and lack lighter fruit and floral tones. But related grapes, Merlot and Cabernet Franc, may soften, balance and add the needed flavor complexity when blended with the Cabernet Sauv. Grapes express themselves somewhat differently in our West Coast terroirs so our vintners are varying and adapting the grape blends, still learning to produce the perfectly balanced wine. Washington has an ever-increasing number of red grape varieties to choose from; besides Cabernet Sauv, Merlot, and Syrah (our big 3), the Washington Wine Commission lists Malbec, Pinot Noir, Sangiovese, Lemberger, Grenache, Zinfandel, Barbera, Petit Verdot, Nebbiolo, Mourvedre, and Petit Syrah. So many possible red blend combinations, and so many possible flavors!

It is my humble opinion that a wine label should suggest what flavors lie hidden within. If dinner is beef, I want something Bordeaux like. For lamb, a Rhone blend. And for spaghetti Bolognese, something Tuscan or Sangiovese like. "Red Blend" could be any or none of the above grapes. Without more information, how do I pair it with my "gourmet masterpiece?"

So yes, winemakers, blend away, and make your best wine. But please, give me a clue, if only on the back label, of what kind of "red blend" it is. List the grapes and percentages or list the "old world" style the wine mirrors, or both. And SES members, if your favored vintners are not so labeling their wine, then please give feedback to encourage them to do so!