



Thoughts On Blending

To many wine lovers, the ultimate expression of the vine is from a single variety (Pinot) grown in a single vineyard (Romanée-Conti), in a single vintage (1961? 1978? 1990? 2009? 2012?). Though we may not all agree about the variety, the vineyard, or the vintage, you get the idea: it's all about specificity and focus. We expect such a wine to have character—a distinct personality.

The reverse side of this discussion would be to ask, Is such a wine the most complex, is it the most balanced, is it the most interesting—ultimately, is it the most satisfying? It must be acknowledged that, in the very best vineyards, in particularly good years, in the hands of the right wine-grower, such a wine can indeed be memorable and quite satisfying. But, although a single variety, single vineyard, single vintage wine can be enjoyable, it's often the case that such a wine lets us down a little bit. Its distinctive traits and characteristics appear more as simplicity, gaps, and lack of completeness.

On the other hand, the temptation to blend, to “correct” the gaps and complete the palate, carries with it the implicit threat of blending away personality toward generic banality. That may be ok for “Yellow Tail” or “Two Buck Chuck,” but for any wine that pretends to offer more, it is hardly acceptable.

What to do?

A number of my friends have found solutions: In Pouilly-sur-Loire, Didier Dagueneau (and now his son and daughter Louis-Benjamin and Charlotte) selected a specific type of soil for his Silex—thus he blends more than one site, but they're all nearby and closely related. In Champagne, Anselme Selosse chose to blend multiple vintages from the same site, which attenuates the signal of the vintage, but amplifies the signal of the site. In Alsace, Jean-Michel Deiss has planted multiple varieties in the same site, his intention being to attenuate the signal of the variety, and again, to amplify the signal of the site.

In each case, there is no doubt that each of these wines is distinctive and unique, and each expresses a great deal of personality, while at the same time being more balanced and complex than any single lot could have been. Thus the goal of blending is to heighten certain characteristics, rather than to erase or dampen them. This is the paradox.

It's like tuning an instrument and getting the adjacent strings to resonate, or tuning an antenna to pull a specific signal out of static.

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