

## The Art of the Blend:<sup>\*</sup>

### What does it require from winemakers, growers, consumers and promoters?

[an address given by Linda Bramble at the opening of the Experts' Tasting held at Brock University on March 1, 2008. Her Excellency the Right Honourable Mich  elle Jean, the Governor General of Canada, and her husband, Mr. Jean-Daniel Lafond, plus 150 experts (winemakers, sommeliers, restaurateurs, wine and food writers, students) in attendance.]

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

There is a growing trend towards premium blends in the marketplace today. I asked several reliable sources from around the world,<sup>\*\*</sup> plus our own Shari Mogk-Edwards and Greg Dunlop, in charge of Vintages sales at the LCBO. Although the evidence is anecdotal, they all agree: premium blends (anything above \$25) are growing in popularity. "The growth has been phenomenal," says Shari.

Assuming all wines are a blend of some sort ---barrels, lots, percentages allowable, imported product, we differentiate today by speaking solely about premium blends.

As you know, there are basically two types of premium blends:

- Conventional blends, where we know what the recipe is and, therefore, we know what to expect, e.g. Bordeaux, Chianti, Champagne or their New World derivatives, *Meritage* or GSM blends
- Less conventional blends such as Pinot Grigio with a Viognier added to give it sex appeal; or Pinot Noir with Syrah to give it gravitas.

As you are also aware, there are basically two rationales behind blending:

- To compensate or supplement the deficiencies of a primary grape, e.g. Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo, Sangiovese or Touriga Nacional
- To create a whole greater than the sum of its parts, depending on the variability of the vintage and the availability of other distinctive yet complementary grapes, e.g. Chateauneuf du Pape

But, proponents of varietal wines ask, "Shouldn't a grape be capable of standing on the purity of its own merits such as Pinot Noir, Chardonnay or Riesling?"

Which leads us to ask:

What is the virtue of a blended wine?

In writing about the secret appeal of a Claret, famous British wine writer, Andre Simon, once wrote: "It has perfect balance, harmony without monotony, individuality within a family

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<sup>\*</sup> I'd like to credit my two wine clubs: the Port Dalhousie Underground (the oldest, permanent, floating wine club in Niagara and Women Uncorked, the newest. The contributions of the members of both clubs helped to shape my remarks today.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Through emails and telephone conversations I queried Jancis Robinson, UK, Johan Bruwer, University of Adelaide, Peter Gordon, Australian Wine Research Institute, Bill Mahoney, Premier Liquor, western New York.

likeness and personality.” Contemporary Washington State winemaker, Mark Coloris, elaborates: “There is a subtle, mysterious quality about blends. They tend to be more complex and interesting when assembled properly, and in my mind, they provide the most complete experience whether enjoyed on their own or with food.”

Certainly, these are all qualities a varietal wine can possess, but, I think there is a distinction: where a varietal wine can have individual purity within the profile of its typicity, a blended wine can have integrity within the collective melding of its parts, to become like no other wine before it.

A blended wine is not a mix, or even a *mélange*, or even an assembly of different parts where the parts are necessarily identifiable. That’s what a mixologist does behind the bar. To have a wine meld requires much more from the winemaker.

What does a blended wine require from the winemaker?

It requires that he or she has:

- A sensory memory of the qualities and profiles of his or her grapes, their idiosyncrasies and foibles, their wanton needs and flagrant indiscretions
- Experience in handling those grapes
- Confidence to be willing to express him or herself and make wines that are distinctive, yet respectful of the land.

The first Ontario winemakers to step outside the varietal framework and make a serious blended premium wine for the market, according to my fellow club members at the Port Dalhousie Underground, were Ron Giesbrecht, Paul Bosc, Karl Kaiser and John Maryniessen; then came along J.L. Groux. Today, along with some of these masters, you’ll taste the wines of some of our current talented winemakers who join their predecessor’s circle of excellence.

What does a blended wine require from the consumer?

The will to step outside the comfort zone of the grape’s name, which many are doing already at a quickening rate. Shari Mogk-Edwards believes we are witnessing the rise of a new wine consumer whose interest and knowledge has increased dramatically; one who wants to experiment, to learn and to try more and more.

It also requires that the consumer has an appropriate language to describe the meld. As there is no such thing as an “immaculate perception,” ---what we perceive when we taste is filtered by place, experience and expectation; it is also true that what we perceive is filtered by how we name that taste. Blended wines, by definition, may not express the fruits of their constituent parts. For this reason, the consumer needs a new lexicon to describe and measure the merits of a blended wine. The aroma wheel does a great job describing the parts of a wine. But perhaps it doesn’t give us the right words to describe the whole. Rather than deconstruct the recognizability of a wine’s individual aromas, maybe it’s time we turned to the perfume industry and learn how to describe the total effect of a wine, or better yet, the mood a wine evokes.

What does a blended wine require from growers?

In the words of assistant winemaker at Cave Spring Cellars, Ilya Suter, from my women's wine club: "What's got to happen," stated Ilya, "is there can be no more room for [inadequate] growers!" [Ilya's terminology was much more vivid than this printed version allows, for which she got a vigorous round of applause from the members, especially from Pinot Noir grower, Wilma Lowery.]

What does a blended wine require from its promoters?

- Sommeliers: refrain from having blended wines occupy negative space on your varietally-based wine lists. Come up with something less soul destroying than "Other Whites" or "Other Reds." Maybe "Mysterious Reds" and "Intriguing Whites"
- Marketers: Create appropriate label language that educates. Find words to describe the meld and not just the parts. The paradox is, however, as much as the new consumers are eager to try blended wines, they still want to retain some semblance of feeling centered by knowing what is in the blend and from there they can calibrate the difference. Even Bordeaux has made it lawful to list the name of the grapes on the label.
- Retailers: Help the customer differentiate between premium and commercial blends. They've been taught to shun blended wines. Remember, they are also thirsty for education.

What does a blended wine require from all of us?

We live in a semi-continental climate, different from any place on the planet. We live with vintage variability. Maybe we don't have to be like New Zealand or Oregon. Maybe our white knight is not a particular variety on which we can build consumer recognition, but rather the exuberance of our diversity. I agree with winemaker Sue Ann Staff when she said, "Let's not restrict ourselves. We should just go for it. After all, what other region in the world can ripen grapes well and then make them bloody well freeze!" [Another round of applause from the members of the women's wine club.]

Rather than choose a single variety of grape as the essential element of our brand, a brand cast in the archetype of the hero ---the white knight with lance raised to come in and save the marketing day, I'd like to propose that our archetype be identified with that of a creator ---a down-to-earth but kingly person, personified by someone like Oscar Peterson, performing center stage, confident in our skills and harmonies, celebrating the fact that we encourage self-expression and foster innovation while listening closely and with humility to the different melodies that our land is trying to express; whose only fears are fears of mediocrity and lack of imagination. Whose aims are to create something accessible and beautiful

The second thing a blended wine requires from us is the belief that we can make exquisite wines. We must believe that we can become known for the beauty of our crafted wines.

Last, to paraphrase a line from Simon Scharma's wonderful book, "The Power of Art," I'd like to see us mercilessly grab consumers in a headlock, rough up their composure a little bit, then rearrange their sense of what a contemporary wine from a small, but inspired place is capable of achieving.

Thank-you very much.