

WINE CLUB: THE BASICS OF RED BLENDING



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This month we take a look at the characteristics of Bordeaux, Rhone and Cape Blends, and pick our top 5 wines to sip through winter. Bring on the big chill!

Winter is coming. After a few articles dealing with summer treats, it is time to get serious and look at red blends for the winter. Why so serious? Because blending has long been viewed as an artform – one that expresses the character of the winemaker and what the winefarm is really made of. This month we will look at some of the basics of blending, focusing on red wine. These basics might provide some clues to what is traditionally a wonderful mystery.

Why do we blend?

Blending different varieties can drastically increase the complexity of the wine. You could view it as a sports team playing to win, or if you like, a creative team creating a... blockbuster ballet. Each team member has its function: Merlot for fruit and elegance, Cabernet Sauvignon for structure, Shiraz for spice etc.

What's in this?

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In South Africa we are particularly interested in varieties. This is one of the reasons why winefarms often list the blend's varieties on the label. In most cases, the variety that is named first makes up the largest percentage of the blend. The percentages then decrease as you move down the list. If you do not see a list of varieties on the bottle, you can also identify a blend by its name: blends often have unique, non-variety names like "The Old Queen in Green Point" or "Great Ego".

In France, where they are much stricter about which varieties may be grown where, the varieties are mostly not found on the label. It is up to you to know which varieties are grown in that area and the percentages are solely the winemaker's business. Personally, I like this idea of enigma.

When do we blend?

When to blend the wine is also often the winemaker's secret. Nine out of ten times, the blending occurs right before bottling, after the components matured separately. If the winemaker wants to opt for more subtle complexity by not mixing wines that were matured in varying styles, he/she could blend the wine before barrel maturation.

Types of blends?

Although this is once again up to the winemakers imagination, there are three types of blends that dominate the South African industry: Bordeaux-style blends, Rhône-style blends and Cape blends.

To make it easier, we could say that **Bordeaux-style blends** comprise of two or more varieties found in the Bordeaux region in France, although this does over-simplify the matter. For red wine, this could be Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and/or Petit Verdot. These blends could be made in an array of styles, but I personally find that the typical South African Bordeaux-style blend is very complex, elegant yet full-bodied, with a pleasant earthy character.

Rhône-style red blends are becoming very popular in South Africa and usually comprise of Rhône-varieties like Shiraz/Syrah (we will talk about the difference in another article), Mourvèdre, Grenache or the white variety, Viognier. Carignan and Cinsaut, not traditionally

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seen as Rhône red varieties, are also becoming popular in these blends. I find that South African Rhône-style blends are often light to medium-bodied wines with particularly fragrant noses and berry-driven palates with hints of spice.

Finally we get to **Cape blends**. The most common definition of this blend is “any red blend that contains the South African variety, Pinotage”. Another definition is that it is a blend of Shiraz/Syrah with non-Rhône varieties, like Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. Whether it is a “Cape-Pinotage” blend, a “Cape-Shiraz” blend, or a mixture of both, I am a sucker for these blends and they usually pair fantastically with South African cuisine.

The panel has spoken and we have the top 5 wines this month





Lanzerac Le Général 2012

One of the finest examples of how rich and thought-provoking a Cape blend could be. Coming from Lanzerac's prestigious Heritage Wines series, this is a lustrous blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinotage, Shiraz and Malbec. It took us quite a few sips to get our heads around this complex and proudly South African wine. An almost floral nose is complimented by an elegant, fruit-forward palate and a haunting, dry finish. Beautifully soft and particularly well-balanced.

Price range: R400-R420

For more, go to lanzerac.co.za

Anthonij Rupert Optima 2011

This is a big wine. In true French style, the label is very secretive about the exact varieties in this wine, although it is often described as a Bordeaux-style blend. Although there is already a lot happening in this wine, it also has great aging potential. Striking cigar box and tobacco aromas on the nose, with classy black berry and spice on the palate. What amazed all of us, was the silky mouthfeel that just begged us to pour another glass... The South African answer to true French elegance.

Price range: R140-R150

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For more, go to rupertwines.com

Zonnebloem Shiraz Mourvèdre Viognier 2013

Just like the Optima, this wine presents us with good value for money. What is really noteworthy is the nose of this wine: “mouldy, floral, with a hint of mushroom” (these are all good things!). Not surprisingly, this wine could benefit from some more time in the bottle, just to calm those enthusiastic, young tannins. If you drink it now though, have it with a hearty stew – the spicy, coffee-infused palate might be just the thing to warm you up this winter.

Price range: R70-R80

For more, go to zonnebloem.co.za

Hartenberg Alchemy Syrah Cabernet Sauvignon 2013

Hartenberg’s entry-level red, the Shiraz Cabernet Sauvignon, has already stolen the hearts of many winedrinkers locally and internationally. Because of that, it comes as no surprise that their relatively new Alchemy range’s Syrah Cabernet Sauvignon is already a force to be reckoned with. A nose of cherry flambé awakens the child in you, but it does not stop there. The unmistakable flavour of milk chocolate soon comes out to play on the palate, even further accentuated if you take a bite of camembert (or brie... I can never tell the difference). Great value!

Price Range: R60-R70

For more, go to hartenbergestate.com

Waterkloof Circle of Life Red 2010

The cool climate of False Bay is doing wonders for these varieties: Merlot, Syrah and Petit Verdot. The cool breezes from the Atlantic helps the Merlot to grow slowly, yielding exceptional complexity. The Syrah and Petit Verdot provides for a cheerful lift on the mid-palate with an abundance of red berries and cinnamon-spicy goodness. Although this wine is

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very drinkable now, it can do with even more time in the bottle if you are curious to see how formidable this reasonably “odd” blend could become.

Price Range: R190-R210

For more, go to waterkloofwines.co.za

Would you like us to review your wines? Send an email to admin@9lives.co.za to get in touch.

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