

“Blending with the Rhone Rangers”

What is it ? Why do it ?

What works, and what doesn't ?

Who are the “Rhone Rangers” and what do they want?

First, to avoid charges of false advertising, you should know that the Rhone Rangers will not be attending tonight's session. It's a long way from California, and besides, we'd have a terrible time getting the horses up the stairs . . .

Who are the Rhone Rangers? It's an organization of grape growers and wineries, mostly in California, devoted to promoting wines using the traditional Rhone grape varieties. Rhone wines are traditionally blends of several different grape varieties, and we will be working with some of them tonight. We will also be working with traditional Bordeaux varieties, as these are almost as often blended. Incidentally, an organization called the Meritage Association promotes the production of American wines containing two or more of the traditional Bordeaux varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. I could have titled this session “Blending with the Meritage Association”, but I think the Rhone Rangers is a much catchier name.

“Blending” is a deceptively simple term that can be used to refer to a wide variety of wine-making techniques. As with many aspects of wine-making, different people have different opinions about it. We'll start by discussing what we mean by that term, reasons why it makes sense, and some suggestions on how to go about it, and things to look out for. I want this to be a hands-on session, so for most of the evening you'll be able to create different blends and see which are more successful than others. Finally, as a sort of dessert at the end of the evening, we will taste what should be a really excellent example of the most famous blended Rhone wine, Chateauneuf du Pape. So hang in there – I think it will be worth the wait.

Blending – What Is It?

First, what do we mean by “blending”? There are a lot of related techniques that might be meant by this term.

“Field Blending” is a time-honored technique used in California and other places – two or more varieties of grapes are interplanted or planted in neighboring rows, harvested and fermented together. Many vineyards in California have Zinfandel interplanted with Petit Sirah and/or Carignane. In the France’s Cote-Rotie region, it is traditional to ferment a small percentage of Viognier, an aromatic white grape, with Syrah. Apparently this helps extract and retain color from the Syrah, along with adding a bit of flavor complexity. In recent decades, however, field blends have become less common.

Blending might also refer to combining two or more non-grape fruit wines – like strawberry and rhubarb, for instance. Or adding a non-grape wine to a grape wine. This can create a lighter, fruitier wine, similar to a wine cooler.

Or you might divide a batch of grapes or juice, and ferment different portions with different yeast varieties, and then re-combine them after fermentation, to get additional flavor complexity.

You might put part of a single batch into an oak barrel, and leave the rest un-oaked. You could blend the two as a way to control how much oak the finished product has. Or you could put parts of a single batch into different types of oak barrels (French, American, Hungarian) or for differing lengths of time, and re-combine them later.

But most often, what I mean by blending is combining two or more grape wines, after fermentation, to produce a better finished product before bottling. This might suggest to some that this technique is intended to address flaws in the wine, and that “good” wine would not be blended.

If there is anyone here who is uncomfortable with the idea of blending varieties, or who would be reluctant to admit to making a blend, I have a couple of lines of argument that I think are pretty persuasive that blending is nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. If not, I can avoid preaching to the choir, and move on to some of the more practical points.

Blending – Good or Bad ?

Is blending wine a good thing or a bad thing? Is it only used to cover up the faults of inferior wines?

I've read on-line posts by other home wine-makers who claim that they would "Never blend a wine." Are they sticking to their principles, or do they have their heads in the sand? Or maybe both?

I think there are two lines of argument that support the notion that there is really nothing wrong with blending – I think of them as the theoretical and the practical.

Theoretical argument:

A good wine requires several components to be in balance – alcohol, acidity, some amount of tannins and possibly some residual sugar. It also needs to have some flavor, some body to give it interest. Preferably also some bouquet – it should smell nice, since most of what we think of as taste occurs in the nose. And we often divide the taste experience into the initial taste, the mid-palate and the finish.

Virtually all grape varieties will have some of each – but very few will have an ideal balance of each of them. There are some varieties that will come pretty close, in some locations, and depending on how the weather has been during the growing season. But in many cases, one or more of these factors will be a little too high or low. For grapes grown in Minnesota, it's often the acidity that is too high. Grapes grown in the Central Valley in California often are harvested with high sugar content and lower acidity than we might want. Even "noble" grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon have weak spots – Cabernet Sauvignon is generally recognized to have little or no mid-palate.

As wine-makers, we try to choose grape varieties that will make pleasant wine. We hope for good weather. If we are growing the grapes, we try to harvest them at just the right time – not too soon, not too late. But eventually, we end up with a crop of specific grapes (or juices) that have specific measurements, and they probably aren't perfect. If we waited for perfect ingredients, we would be waiting a long time, and not having much fun in the meantime. So we ferment what we have, and try to make the best of it.

That's where I think blending fits in nicely. By blending varieties with complementary features, we can create a wine that is more pleasant, and closer to an "ideal" wine, than the individual components.

Blending – Good or Bad ?

Practical Argument:

If blending were really a bad idea, we would expect to find that the highest-rated, most desirable, most expensive wines would be single varietals, and that cheaper wines would tend to be blends. Is this reality?

Well, the oldest wine ranking around is the classification of Bordeaux vineyards from about 1855. The French weren't trying to determine which wines were the best – they just looked at which vineyards consistently commanded the highest prices. Let's look at the top category for reds and whites. Among the reds, there are five vineyards in the highest category, sometimes called "First Growths":

Chateau Lafite-Rothschild	80% Cab Sauv, 20% Merlot, 5% CF, PV
Chateau Latour	75% Cab Sauv, 20% Merlot, 5% CF, PV
Chateau Margaux	75% Cab Sauv, 20% Merlot, 5% CF, PV
Chateau Haut-Brion	45% Cab Sauv, 45% Merlot, 9% CF, 1% PV
Chateau Mouton-Rothschild	77% Cab Sauv, 11% Merlot, 10% CF, 2% PV

All of these vineyards produce a flagship red wine from traditional Bordeaux varieties. In a good year, these wines can retail for up to \$1000 per bottle.

For the whites, only one vineyard was included in the top category – Chateau d'Yquem, which makes a sweet Sauternes wine. It is traditionally about 50% Semillon and 50% Sauvignon Blanc. A bottle of Chateau d'Yquem is likely to cost you at least \$500.

And look at Italy – yes, some of the famous Italian wines are associated mainly with a single varietal, such as Barolo with the Nebbiolo grape, or Chianti with the Sangiovese grape. But Italian wine laws allow the addition of various other grape varieties in virtually all of these famous wines. And if you look at what are the most expensive wines, for the last couple of decades it has been the Super-Tuscans – blends of Sangiovese (the main red variety grown in Tuscany) with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, produced using French wine-making techniques (and barrels) rather than the more traditional Italian techniques.

These are consistently among the most expensive wines in the world, and they are nearly all blends of two or more varieties. So I think we can let go of the notion that blending is only for "inferior" wines. The market clearly doesn't believe that.

Blending Principles

1. You can't fix a "bad" wine by blending.

If your wine has something that doesn't belong – oxidation, or rotten egg, or geranium flavor, for instance – you can't fix that by blending. You'll just be throwing good wine after bad.

2. A wine that has too much, or too little, of normal desirable wine characteristics (alcohol, acidity, tannin, etc.) is a good candidate for blending.

If your wine is merely a bit out of balance, or is fundamentally sound but is lacking something desirable (like bouquet, or mid-palate), then blending is worth looking at.

3. Blending can add complexity to a good wine.

Blending is a way to add interesting flavors, body or finish to an acceptable but maybe undistinguished wine.

4. How to choose some candidates for blending.

- a. If you are starting with a variety from a recognized region, the first things to consider blending are other varieties from the same region. If you are starting with Cabernet Sauvignon, consider other Bordeaux varieties (Merlot, Cab. Franc, etc.). If you are starting with a Syrah, consider other Rhone varieties (Grenache, Mourvèdre, Petit Sirah, etc.).
- b. Consider other commonly blended varieties. So if you are starting with Zinfandel, one of the varieties often blended is Petit Sirah.
- c. Find a variety with strengths and weaknesses that offset the wine you are starting with.

5. You can't blend what you don't have.

It helps to have an assortment of different varieties available. But even if you don't, a little creativity can often solve the problem. To add some complexity to a Bordeaux blend, just a bottle or two of Cab. Franc or Petit Verdot in a carboy can make a big difference – it might work just to buy a bottle or two of a commercial wine and add it. A bottle or two of Mourvèdre in a Rhone blend might have a similar effect. Or you might find another wine-maker that is willing to swap a couple of gallons of one kind of wine for another. As a last resort, you can make a batch of wine specifically to blend with another batch.

6. Blend on a small scale first, to find the right proportions.

Start by blending two components, two or three samples to begin with, using different proportions, along with samples of the base wines. Each will be an ounce or two. You might start with ratios of 25/75, 50/50 and 75/25. If none of the blends is clearly better than the base wines, you might need to look for other blending partners. If one of the blends is nicer than the others, try another set of ratios in a narrower range. Say the 75/25 blend seems best at first – try 80/20 and 70/30. With just a few trials, you can usually narrow it down to a small range.

7. Get some other opinions on your preferred blend.

Sometimes we become too familiar with our own wines. It's a good idea to get input from other people before you do the actual full-scale blending. What seems "good enough" to us may not impress others the same way. Round up a few friends or relations to compare the base wines to the proposed blend – they'll be flattered, and you'll get good feedback on whether this is a blend worth doing.

8. Don't be afraid to experiment.

While many commercial wines are (mostly) single varietals, there are also many blended wines, some of which have very eclectic assortments of grape varieties. Sokol Blosser's *Evolution* features nine varieties: Pinot Gris, Muller-Thurgau, White Riesling, Semillon, Muscat Canelli, Gewürztraminer., Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Sylvaner. It sounds like a bit of a train wreck, but it's apparently quite successful.

One (minor) caveat – some varieties are so delicate or subtle that they can easily be overshadowed by more assertive varieties. So, for instance, you could try blending Pinot Noir with Petit Sirah – but it wouldn't take much Petit Sirah to completely overshadow the Pinot Noir. If you're starting with a less assertive variety (like Pinot Noir), you'll want to start with very small amounts of the other varieties in your blends.

As far as I have been able to determine, there are no grape varieties that actually clash – that is, where the blend is actually inferior to the component wines. At worst, the blend will be different but about as good (or bad) as the original components. And fairly often, the blend will be a noticeable improvement. So don't be afraid to experiment and try some non-standard combinations. You're only using an ounce or two at a time – if one blend isn't successful, try another.

9. If a blend isn't better than the component wines, it's probably not worth the effort.

This is a personal judgment, but my rule of thumb is that if the blend isn't pretty obviously an improvement over the base wines, I don't do it – I may just bottle the individual wines separately.

10. Give the new blend some time to settle out before you bottle it.

Wine chemistry is a complicated thing. In some cases, you may blend two or more stable, clear wines and find the resulting wine has turned cloudy or is throwing sediment. It's a good idea to give the newly blended wine at least a week or two before trying to bottle it, to see if anything has happened that would require intervention. If it has, you need to deal with that condition before bottling.

11. Be especially careful if any of the component wines has residual sugar, or potassium sorbate, or if some of the components have gone through MLF and some have not.

- a. If any of the components has residual sugar, you need to make sure fermentation won't re-start in the resulting blend. Even if the component wine has been sorbated and is stable, after you blend it with other wines the level of sorbate may be too low to prevent renewed fermentation. You should make sure the level of sorbate in the blended wine is high enough to prevent fermentation, and this will usually require adding more sorbate (along with pot. meta-bisulfite). You also need to make sure that the blended wine does NOT undergo malo-lactic fermentation, as the ML bacteria will digest the sorbate and produce geranium flavors that will spoil the wine.
- b. If any of the components contains potassium sorbate, you need to make sure the blend does NOT undergo malo-lactic fermentation. To be really safe, you may want to treat all the components with lysozyme (to kill any ML bacteria) and make sure you keep the SO₂ levels at recommended levels. Lysozyme may produce haze or sediment, so plan on letting the wine settle for a week or two after treatment.
- c. If some components have undergone MLF and some have not, there may be enough ML bacteria in the blend to re-start MLF. If none of the components has sorbate added, you may want to allow the MLF to run to completion. This may take weeks or months, and may require the addition of ML nutrients, warmer temperatures, etc. If you do NOT want the MLF to re-start, you may want to treat the blend with lysozyme (as described above).

Blending Session Logistics

We will have several tables with several wines at each table, along with pipettes to measure small amounts of wine. I recommend a sample size of 24 or 25 ml as large enough to get a good impression of the bouquet, and several sips, but not so large that we'll run out before most folks get a chance to try most of the wines.

Two tables will have several traditional Bordeaux varieties – Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot.

Two tables will have several Rhone wines, including Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre, Cinsault and Petit Sirah. There will also be several white Rhone varieties – Viognier, Roussanne.

Two tables will have samples of about 5 different wines I blended together last year to create Big Barrel Red. You can see what combination of base wines might have made a better blend. You can also see if you think it would be improved by blending with elderberry.

At each table, I have placed cards with several suggested blends you can try. After that, you are welcome to try a few blends of your own if you like. After about 15 or 20 minutes, when people have had a chance to try several of the blends at their table, we will ask for comments, and then you will have a chance to change tables and sample some other varieties.

When the tasting sessions are over, we will ask for any final comments on the process, and then we will taste the Chateauneuf du Pape. Hopefully it will be worth the wait!

Bordeaux Blend Metaphor

Tim Vandergrift's Bordeaux Blend Metaphor

Tim Vandergrift of WinExpert wrote a marvelous article on Bordeaux wines and grape varieties for the August-September 2004 issue of WineMaker magazine. He discusses six different grape varieties, and describes a Bordeaux blend by comparing it to a jelly donut – what we used to call a Bismark when I was growing up. First is the Cabernet Sauvignon – it provides the structure of the donut, but as Tim describes it, there is really no middle there – it has some nice blackcurrant and cedar flavors up front, and a long tannic finish, but nothing in the mid-palate. The Merlot fills up that “hole” in the mid-palate, contributing some plum and cherry flavors. He describes Cabernet Franc as the powdered sugar on the donut – contributing some violet and raspberry flavors, especially in the nose. Tim describes Petit Verdot as a sort of super-Cabernet Sauvignon, and Carmenere as a super-Merlot. Both are traditional Bordeaux varieties which are diminishing in popularity in France. Finally, he mentions Malbec, the last of the 6 traditional Bordeaux varieties, with licorice, chocolate and espresso notes, as being the cup of coffee, to wash down the jelly-filled, powdered sugared donut.

It's a bit of an elaborate simile, but it does give you a very visual sense for the way in which the different grape varieties contribute different features to the final product.

Rhone Grape Varieties

Chateauneuf du Pape Grape Varieties

Red varieties:

Cinsault
Counoise
Grenache Noir
Mourvèdre
Muscardin
Piquepoul Noir
Syrah
Terret Noir
Vaccarèse

White and pink varieties:

Bourboulenc
Clairette Blanche
Clairette Rose
Grenache Blanc
Grenache Gris
Picardan
Piquepoul Blanc
Piquepoul Gris
Roussanne

* Any proportions of the approved varieties can be used for Chateauneuf du Pape, either red or white. Most CdP is red, and in most cases it contains 50% or more Grenache, followed by Syrah and Mourvèdre.

* One vineyard, Chateau Beaucastel, makes a point of including all of the allowed varieties in its Chateauneuf du Pape blend.

Rhone Ranger Recognized Varieties

Red Varieties:

Carignan
Cinsault
Counoise
Grenache
Mourvèdre
Muscardin
Piquepoul Noir
Syrah
Terret Noir
Vaccarèse
Petit Sirah (Durif)

White and pink varieties:

Bourboulenc
Clairette Blanche

Grenache Blanc

Picardan
Piquepoul Blanc

Roussanne
Marsanne
Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains
Ugni Blanc (Trebbiano)
Viognier

* Petit Sirah is a cross between Syrah and Peloursin, developed in France in 1880 by Dr. Durif. Not grown in France, but in California and Australia

* Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains is known by various other names, including Muscat Canelli

* Ugni Blanc is widely grown in France and Italy. It is the principal grape used for producing Cognac.

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