

COLUMNS | THE COLLECTION

The trend to blend

Sarah Heller MW explores the art of blending wine and how, after years of championing site expression, winemakers are re-evaluating the part it can play and the innovations in skilful blending that are only just beginning to be made

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The Badia a Coltibuono estate in Chianti, a producer using local grape varieties as minor blending elements

One of the wine world's enduring splits is between regions that isolate and regions that blend. Burgundy – once nearly alone in the former camp (at least in the red-wine sphere) has won over many to its point of view in recent years. Before the paradigm shift from Bordeaux to Burgundy, there was no general sense that varietal wines were necessarily superior to blends. However, today many traditional blending regions – especially in Italy – seem to equate varietal wines with top quality, partially because of their ostensible superiority at expressing site (another Burgundian touchstone).

Meanwhile, Champagne, Burgundy's neighbour and historic archrival, has been viewed as a poster child for blending – of grapes, sites or vintages – since at least the

time of Dom Pérignon. This trend arguably went too far in the 19th and 20th centuries, leading wine writer, négociant and château owner Alexis Lichine to describe Champagne as a ‘manufactured wine’ in his 1950s classic *Wines of France*. Lichine’s negative stance on blending is reflective of the times, when wine fraud was only just coming under control and much blending was undertaken to, in Lichine’s words, ‘make something mediocre out of what would be merely bad’. Of note, Lichine was also responsible for spurring the varietal labelling movement in 1940s California, before which most New World producers would market wines with generic names like ‘Burgundy’ or ‘Chablis’ according to their general style.



Moët & Chandon's new prestige cuvée, Collection Impériale No.1, is a multivintage blend

However, times have changed. Even Champagne has been bitten by the isolation bug – first, for practical reasons (the grower movement’s producers had much more limited material for blending); then, probably, for more mercantile ones (the commercially savvy grandes maisons were not going to pass up the opportunity to add scarcity to their

marketing mix). The question now is whether the whole wine world's shift away from blending (treated almost as a moral imperative in some quarters) has gone too far.

Blending is, after all, arguably the winemaker's greatest art, and Champagne's chefs de caves are some of the wine world's greatest craftspeople. In an era apparently obsessed with denying the human role in the production of great wine, that almost seems like a backhanded compliment. But intellectual honesty demands we acknowledge that even in Burgundy the human hand is at least as important to wine quality as site. It is only in recent years, having become so fixated on site specificity, that we've entertained the notion that site characteristics might outweigh raw quality.

In fact, several elements of our shared concept of quality seem to strongly favour blended wines. Balance, for example, and complexity, would seem better served by a wine blended from many sites and varieties than a single-site varietal wine. If wines are shapes, a skilfully blended wine has smoother contours, less extreme proportions and more symmetry, while more 'isolated' wines should be more distinctive but perhaps more monolithic.



In an era obsessed with denying the human role in great wine, praise for the art of blending almost seems like a backhanded compliment



On the other hand, the blunter components of quality – concentration, intensity, length – reflect an era when ripening grapes was still a challenge, favouring warmer spots like the middle of the Côte d'Or, the sorì sites of the Langhe or, indeed, the southeast-facing zones of Bouzy and Ambonnay. These natural distinctions were then reinforced by wine regulations, as in Burgundy, where, when standards were being created for the AOC in the mid-1930s, the required minimum potential alcohol rose as the site became more narrowly defined, all but ensuring single-site wines would be higher in quality than those blended from a larger area.

Today, though, ripeness is no longer the primary consideration. A warmer and more erratic climate has made balance and complexity more elusive (and hence desirable) traits. Where the production of non-vintage Champagne was once aimed at adding richness to thin years, today it is the delicate, fresh reserve wines that are most prized.

There are some encouraging signs that winemakers are re-evaluating the role of blending. In Italy, there is the embrace of local varieties as minor blending elements, as in Chianti Classico (Badia a Coltibuono is a big champion), or the return of ultra-prestige multi-comune Barolos such as Scavino's new blended Riserva. In Bordeaux, there is Liber Pater, but also less extreme experimentation with varieties like Malbec. Characterising the project as haute oenologie, Moët & Chandon has made the decision to launch its new prestige cuvée, Collection Impériale No.1, as a multivintage blend (in contrast to its original prestige cuvée, Dom Pérignon, which is the quintessential vintage Champagne).

This is just the latest shot fired in favour of skilful blending; it seems unlikely to be the last.



By Sarah Heller MW

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