



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

BLENDING BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN CABERNET

FRANCE has developed some great wine partnerships. Shiraz viognier, semillon sauvignon blanc and GSM to name just three. But probably the most famous one is the colloquially named "Bordeaux Blend". I like blends. To me the perfect world would be walking into a cellar door and being offered one or perhaps two wines, a white and red; similar to what happens in the Chateaux of Bordeaux. It's a statement that perhaps snobbishly says "here...that is all you are going to get, like it or lump it" and then explaining "we have tried so many variations and we think this suits the terroir and we like it". Successful blends are an example of "the whole being greater than the sum of its parts". On the down side blends can also be a case of what was available just got put together;

in wetter climates. Cabernet franc is even earlier ripening than both cabernet and merlot, which explains why it is found to the north of Bordeaux in the Loire Valley. When made into wine merlot has a riper profile and can generate an additional 1 per cent of alcohol over cabernet, another useful attribute in cool European vintages, but not a crucial factor in Australia.

Cabernet sauvignon has small, thick skinned berries that give high colour, tannins and acidity. It crops lightly and yields sometimes half of what shiraz achieves. It produces muscular wines, especially if not fully ripe. In my early wine career I clearly remember attending major London en primeur Bordeaux tastings (one of those life experiences that was definitely wasted on a youth)

known as bouchet in Bordeaux, gives even higher level of methoxypyrazine characters if not ripe and can be extremely leafy. It is found in both the left and right bank areas in Bordeaux and is particularly important in Saint-Emilion where it is blended with merlot. Chateau Cheval Blanc being the supreme example where a bottle of the iconic 1947 vintage could set you back \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Cabernet, in my books, has a better propensity to display a regional signature than possibly any other variety in Australia. The whiff of that maritime herbaceous character from Margaret River or the classic mint and slight eucalyptus notes from Coonawarra or the cassis black fruit richness of the Clare are three of our most classic recognisable regional characteristics. You could add into the mix the traditional Yarra producers choosing a Bordeaux blend over a single varietal bottling as another style. What is also unique to Australia is blending cabernet with shiraz and while I find the latter can dominate this marriage there are some successful wines, take Redbank's Sally's Paddock for instance. It often displays some cooler mint notes sourced from its Pyrenees vineyard in Western Victoria. Last year, owner Neill Robb celebrated the 40th vintage of this classic Australian blend.

Another classic blend comes from Australia's first boutique winery - Lake's Folly. The estate was established in 1963 by renowned surgeon, author and bon-vivant, Dr Max Lake OAM, who adored cabernet sauvignon. For the last 14 years Lake's Folly has been under the stewardship of the WA-based Fogarty Wine Group and winemaker Rodney Kempe. It has remained a tour de force blend and Australia's most collected cabernet, according to the 2013 Wine Ark Survey.

Its red is generally a 60 per cent cabernet, 20 per cent petit verdot, 10 per cent merlot and 10 per cent syrah blend. The high

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and you see a number of these on the market. Historically blends came together for a number of reasons. Field blends, for example, were where grape varieties were planted and harvested together, and ended up being co-fermented. The classic example being the Rhone Valley Cote Rotie syrah viognier blend.

In Bordeaux, and especially the left bank, the wines are blends of predominately cabernet sauvignon and merlot with cabernet franc and petit verdot added in smaller proportions. In the marginal maritime climate of Bordeaux different grape varieties were planted as an insurance policy for inclement weather at flowering and harvest. Cabernet sauvignon is a late flowering and ripening variety, while merlot buds and ripens a little earlier. Merlot is also more resistant to powdery mildew than cabernet, especially useful

and tasting countless "growths" that were as austere and tannic as an old leather boot, and wondering if they would ever be drinkable. Looking back that was probably the so-called "generous" 1982 vintage. The Bordeaux region is able to achieve riper grapes these days through modern canopy management techniques as well as the effects of global warming. This trend results in higher alcohol levels and earlier maturing, softer wines.

If the vintage is cool cabernet can reveal an herbaceous methoxypyrazine side with similarities to sauvignon blanc. This is not altogether surprising as DNA testing at the Davis Campus of the University of California in 1996 identified cabernet sauvignon as the offspring of cabernet franc and sauvignon blanc. Merlot, carmenere and malbec are also distant relations of cabernet. Cabernet franc,

percentage of petit verdot is quite unique. Kempe comments on the difficulty of tending petit verdot: "It's 20 per cent of the blend but can consume 90 per cent of our time. It's fickle and does not like it too hot or too cold, it can overcrop easily so it needs strict pruning back and you cannot get it wet". In other words rain at harvest is a killer for petit verdot. But he reckons it is worth the effort in the long run. "It provides a really interesting component, adding natural acidity and a violet aroma, as well as a fantastic colour to the wine," he says.

Lake's Folly started off as a straight cabernet sauvignon but changed to a Bordeaux blend from 1994 with the introduction of petit verdot and merlot. "Merlot adds what we call a fairy floss element to the wine, it adds fruit and flavour to the middle palate," Kempe says. While the soils are fairly complex at Lake's Folly, sometimes changing every 100m, the red varieties are generally grown on red clay soils with a limestone underlay, not dissimilar to Coonawarra's terra rossa. Lake's Folly cabernet blend can best be thought of as an estate blend rather than a regional style as some commentators think that the Hunter Valley is not cabernet country. "I always see cedar notes in our wine and that is not a product of the oak maturation," Kempe says. "You do get blackberry aromas when they are young, and some black cherry and red fruits in cooler vintages."

The Hunter brings its own unique challenges to winemaking with fast ripening periods and the necessity of picking early with summer rainfall an ever-present threat. Sometimes that works in cabernet's favour when it can survive through a downpour and successfully dry out.

With the inherent structure of cabernet sauvignon it naturally has a predisposition to age gracefully. Cabernet is capable of offering cedar and leather notes with cigar box and earthy characteristics to a collector who has a mind to mature it. 