



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

## BLEND IT LIKE BORDEAUX

AS early reports start to drip in from those lucky enough to taste en primeur barrel samples, it seems the 2016 vintage is another great year for Bordeaux. It highlights the global interest and demand in cabernet sauvignon blends. The complexity that these wines can achieve makes it undoubtedly the best blended wine in the world.

A traditional bordeaux blend is cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc, with the occasional splash of petit verdot. We use the term in Australia to indicate this blend of grape varieties and it is of course referring to the wines of the French region of Bordeaux on the south western Atlantic coast of France, and while we are a long way from the banks of the Gironde estuary, Australia produces some excellent blends from this noble, princely (and often pricey) quartet.

The principal grape in the blend is normally cabernet sauvignon. This is a cross between cabernet franc and sauvignon blanc. It is late budding and slow to ripen, therefore it relies on stable vintage conditions to reach physiological maturity, something that Australia can be relied upon to do as compared to the fickle climate in Bordeaux. The grapes have a wealth of phenolics derived from small berries, thick skins and its high ratio of pips to pulp which enables the winemaker to produce deeply coloured and tannic wines. The vigorous vine is however susceptible to powdery mildew and eutypa dieback (dead arm), a fungal disease that rots the wood on the vine. The hard trunk enables cabernet to be mechanically harvested and provides some resistance to severe northern hemisphere winter weather.

The classic bordeaux blend's ancestral home is in the gravel soils on the left bank of the Gironde river estuary in the Haut-Medoc appellations of St Estephe, Pauillac, St-Julien and Margaux. Planting different grapes was traditionally done as an insurance policy in case the cabernet sauvignon did not ripen fully. Merlot, for example, ripens a full two weeks before cabernet sauvignon. Cabernet franc buds and matures a week or so earlier than cabernet sauvignon. It can withstand poor weather at harvest but can be thin, green and herbaceous if picked under ripe. Petit verdot ripens the latest of all the varieties and often fails to ripen at all in Bordeaux. It did have the reputation of only ripening fully once a decade, but global warming has helped and plantings are now slowly increasing.

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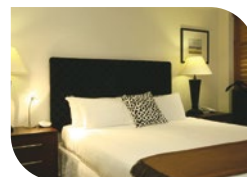
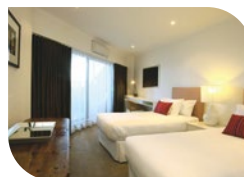
But the blend rationale goes beyond an insurance policy when you taste the wines. They are seamlessly and harmoniously a match. Cabernet sauvignon provides the framework for the blend and contributes body, tannin and acidity. Merlot adds a plum fruit softness to cabernet, especially on the middle palate. You will find some people talk about cabernet sauvignon

having a "hole in the middle palate" or referring to it as "the doughnut effect". This is where the wine makes an initial impact on the front palate but fades away in the middle until the dry, tannic finish kicks in. Merlot assists by adding fruit sweetness on the middle palate as well as being slightly more alcoholic. Cabernet franc doesn't have the heaviness of the other grapes and is more delicate and provides floral, violet aromas. When petit verdot does come to the party it adds fruit, tannin and a deep colour to the blend.

Climatically both cabernet sauvignon and merlot can lose their identity should the climate become too hot, while insufficient warmth results in harsh, green and undesirable herbaceous character. It's a case of balance as some hints of herbaceousness can be an attribute and a telltale aroma to the varieties.

In Australia some regions choose to blend cabernet sauvignon while other regions go it alone. In Victoria's Yarra Valley, there has been a tradition to make a bordeaux blend. This was born out of the practices of early European (Swiss) settlers. The de Pury family, for instance, goes back five generations and 150 years with their Yeringberg winery and they produce a classic cabernet blend. Mount Mary was started by John Middleton at the dawn of the modern resurgence of the Yarra Valley in the early 1970s. Mount Mary's aptly named Quintet is a classic bordeaux blend with the touch of malbec as the fifth grape. Yarra Yering predates Mount Mary, being established in 1969 by Dr Bailey Carrodus, who was inspired by the French wines he drank while studying at Oxford. The Dry Red No 1 was his homage to the bordeaux blend. These


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are complex wines that age gracefully and are considered as some of Australia's elite wines.

In Coonawarra the trend has always been to let cabernet sauvignon sing on its own, and it performs perfectly well. Maybe it is the fruit concentration that it gets and the fact that the climate is milder. The mean January temperature (MJT) in Coonawarra is 19.6C, while in the Yarra Valley it ranges from 17.9C up to 19.4C due to the different sub regions and altitudes. Coonawarra is around 50m above sea level, while the Yarra goes up to 400m. Rainfall is dramatically different, with Coonawarra only getting half of what is doused on the Yarra. I think the climate is one explanation why you need the insurance policy and blending options in the Yarra and why a stable climate gives cabernet a chance to shine in Coonawarra. Coonawarra cabernet sauvignon displays mint, eucalyptus and leafy aromas as well as blackberry and blackcurrant fruits.

Margaret River is the other key region for bordeaux blends, in particular cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Here the temperature is highest of the three regions, with an MJT of 20.4C but that doesn't tell the whole story as ocean surrounds the region on practically three sides and there is a definite maritime effect. I find this region, in some years, can display the most herbaceous characters of any Australian cabernet sauvignon and therefore needs the assistance of merlot to provide the fruit support.

It's hard to choose between the three regions as to a favourite, all three have their strengths, so the easiest answer is to enjoy and drink all three. 

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