

Unusual varietal blends on rise

Damskey finds inspiration in fusion cuisine and wild new flavor experiments by top chefs

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Kerry Damskey likes to mix things up a bit. Literally. The longtime Geyserville-based winemaker - this year will mark his 30th harvest - has at this point done it all, from making award-winning Sonoma County chardonnay to helping establish premium wine grapes in San Diego County to consulting for winery clients in China, India and Eastern Europe.

Maybe he needed a challenge. Or maybe he was on to something. Whatever the motivation, Damskey became a fully committed blender of varietals not typically found together in one bottle.

"There's a whole new interest in non-traditional blends," said Damskey, who is making a cabernet sauvignon/syrah blend under his own Palmeri label, as well as for Dry Creek Valley clients Montemaggiore and Dutcher Crossing and Sula Vineyards in India.

"Although the blend has been done for decades in Australia, this is a new concept in California," he continued. "It's also similar to the Super Tuscans made in Italy from cabernet and sangiovese."

Not in France would the two openly meet: cabernet sauvignon - a varietal associated with the grandest of wine regions, Bordeaux - and syrah, king of the Rhone, a quieter appellation across the country where the genuflection is less extreme.

"It's a natural blend, although it's certainly not an Old World blend," Damskey added. "Actually I take that back, there are purists that don't believe it, but it's been a closet blend in France for years. They would bring syrah over to upgrade cabernet. They didn't talk about it, but it was done."

Lately, Damskey has found inspiration in our burgeoning openness to fusion cuisine, and the wild imaginings and experimentation occurring in the world's finest kitchens.

"Winemakers should react from an organic level of putting flavors together the way chefs do," he said. In California, where so many varietals grow well and an entrepreneurial spirit runs free, it was only a matter of time before we started to see bold new blends."



Damskey's business partner and wife, Daisy Damskey, credits the never-ending search for something new as well as a growing sophistication for all things food and wine.

"(Wine drinkers) have done chardonnay. They've done cabernet. The conversation's opened up," she said. "We're really open to new flavors and much more cognizant of what we're putting in our mouths. It's a sense of adventure."

As such, Damskey aims to put the highest mark of quality on his unusual blends, sourcing pedigreed mountain fruit, including from Napa's storied Stagecoach Vineyard, and spending countless hours of hands-on time in the cellar, with an emphasis on small-lot fermentation.

Damskey is like a chef awaiting a diner's reaction; it's ultimately not only about the method, it's about the end result. Do the blends taste good?

"The combination excites me because it gives a lush cedar, tobacco, cabernet component with the blueberry fruit and slightly savage leather character of syrah," he says.

Lise Ciolino of Montemaggiore has found the same to be true of her cabernet/syrah blend.

"Our hillside estate syrah and cabernet fit together like an elegant hand in a silk glove," she said.

"The intense fruit of the syrah tends to brighten the sternness of the cabernet, while the big tannins of the cab give the syrah more structure."

Tandem Winery in Sebastopol is even more experimental, mixing both red and white varietals for its Peloton Red Wine.

"With the purpose of speaking not to varietal correctness or regional character," explained winemaker Greg La Follette, "but providing maximum deliciousness."

A peloton, as the winery explains, is an assemblage of many individuals into one body, like a "peloton" of cyclists.

Tandem's red wine blend is just that, a crazy combination of sangiovese (for structure), pinot noir (for softness), zinfandel (brambly, blueberry character and smooth mouth feel), syrah (smoky, meaty characters and structure) and carignane (chocolate flavor, silky tannins).

That's just the red varietals. Also added into the mix are small amounts of chardonnay (for texture) and gewurtztraminer and viognier (aromatics).

Paraduxx Winery in Yountville is currently making a zinfandel/cabernet sauvignon blend. Ten cases of the 2004 vintage were among the highest-grossing lots at last year's Premiere Napa Valley auction, a harbinger of which wines will do well in the marketplace. By combining the two, the winery hopes to make a wine with a distinctly Californian personality.

Other winemakers cop to making an unusual blend because they had to.

"Sometimes the best wines are not conceived by hours of strategic planning between vineyard managers, winemakers and marketing gurus," writes owner/winemaker Dave Phinney on the Orin Swift Cellars website.

"Much more commonly they are the end product of what Mother Nature and some dumb luck conspires to give us. The Prisoner is the epitome of the latter." The Prisoner is the name of Phinney's very popular red blend, the 2004 vintage of which is half zinfandel, half syrah, cabernet, petite sirah and charbono.

The main challenges when he first started making The Prisoner in 2000, he described, were a zinfandel "with too much stuffing"; a cab with not enough; and a series of small lots of zin, charbono and petite sirah that would have been a nightmare to bottle separately. So he threw them all together.

Preston Vineyards's syrah/petite sirah blend was borne of similar roots, vintner Lou Preston explaining, "By golly the two grapes sounded alike, so 25 years ago I planted them side by side and proceeded to combine them in the bottle. Serendipity in a glass."

Damskey, on the other hand, isn't leaving anything to chance.

"You need to have a standout definition of one varietal, and then you have other nuances, a little spice rack. But you need to have a standout," he said.

"We're trying to make wines that really taste good and not necessarily create something that's new and different just because it is. The yummy factor. That's the deal."

Last changed: Aug 16, 2006 © The Press Democrat.