

# SNOW ON WINE

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## Assemblage'



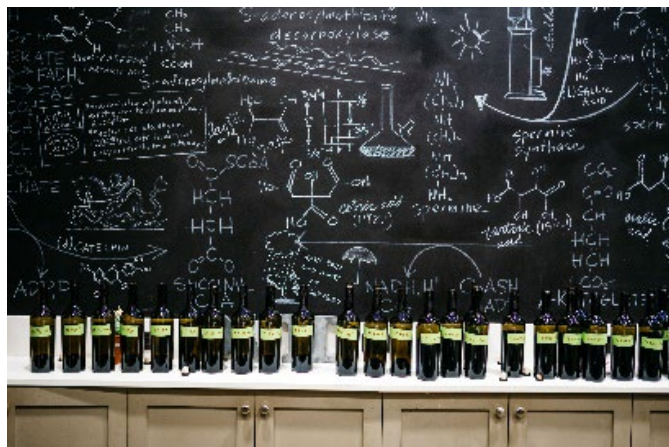
Way back at the SES November tasting, Sommelier Alex Van Amburg presented “The Art and Science of Wine Blends.” In the Wineminder article describing his presentation he taught us that “wine blending is the process of combining wines made of different varietals or in different years.”<sup>4</sup> He pointed out at the tasting that winemakers blend to produce the best possible wine. They may have several varietals, each somewhat unbalanced. Perhaps one with prominent dark stone fruit flavor but too little bright red fruit and too much tannin, and other(s) with more bright red fruit and softer tannins. These could, should and would be blended together so they improve each other, resulting in a more delicious and balanced wine; one that we can and will quaff and savor. Of course some of the World’s best wines are almost always blends of different varietals; such as Bordeaux, and wine made of it’s grape varietals around the world. You no doubt can think of dozens of other examples of wines that are blends, but also perhaps of varietals which are rarely blended with other grapes. Maybe Nebiolo in Barolo and Barbaresco, Sangiovese in Brunello, or Pinot Noir<sup>3</sup>.

I thought of Pinot Noir, which when made as table wine (as opposed to as a sparkling wine), is essentially never blended with any other varietal.<sup>1,2</sup> Many of you have asked me, “what is your favorite varietal?” Usually I say, “that is like asking which of my children I love most!” But Julie will tell you it is Pinot Noir. And this, dear friends, is a thinly veiled excuse to write about that ancient grape whose ancestral origins in Burgundy can be documented back to the mid 14th century.<sup>1,2</sup> My devotion however only extends to the early 1980’s. But after the 2004 movie, “Sideways,” disrupted our West Coast’s love affair with Merlot, many more of you came on board to Pinot. Extolling Pinot of the Santa Maria and Santa Ynez Valleys, and the Santa Rita Hills<sup>2</sup>, the star of the movie, Miles, points out the finicky and difficult nature of this grape. That it grows successfully only in select microclimates with cool foggy evening and mornings. And also that it is the varietal whose aroma and flavors most reflect even subtle variations in terroir.<sup>2</sup> Such that just a sniff and taste of a great Pinot can, for many, instantly put us back on the sunny deck of the winery where we first encountered it.

If like Julie and I you spend time in tank and barrel rooms with winemakers, then you know that a monovarietal wine like Pinot is indeed improved by combining various cuvee’s<sup>5</sup> and crus<sup>5</sup> that are only Pinot Noir. Maybe technically not blending as Alex defined it, but surely analogous to the blending of different varietals. It is all about identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each of many crus<sup>5</sup>, and finding how to combine them to produce their best possible wines. And wouldn’t you know it - the French have a name to set this apart as a special sort of blending: **Assemblage’!**<sup>1</sup>

Pinot’s tendency for slow and irregular ripening can stretch out harvest. This may be one of several reasons that Burgundians invented the small open top fermenters, which have been adopted by most Pinot Noir producers worldwide. Small cuvee<sup>5</sup> size allows the grape must from each phase of harvest, or from an estates’ different terroirs and/or clones, to be separately fermented, and carefully tracked. Early grapes picked when “sugar maturity” first occurs retain high levels of malic acid, but may yet lack phenolic maturity. Grapes picked later, as sugar levels rise, typically show decline of malic acid but achieve better phenolic maturity -- thicker darker skins laden with rising levels of tannins and flavor.

Experience at many estates has shown that subtle terroir variation even within one vineyard can show up as detectable differences in the grapes. And Pinot has over 50 clones. Most vigneronns plant more than one. A lot to sort out and monitor, but at the next stage, the complexity skyrockets!



After primary fermentation, the grape must generally remain in the fermentation tanks for extended maceration and extraction, and to allow some settling and clarification. This new wine then gets “racked” from fermenters into oak barrels. At this point there are a bunch o’ barrels! And in them developing wine is undergoing a bunch o’ changes. Malolactic fermentation is converting sharp malic acid into softer buttery lactic acid (and CO<sub>2</sub>). Flavors are developing and new flavor chemicals forming as various alcohols and acids interact, and tannins are combining in various ways and becoming less astringent with better mouth feel. No two barrels develop the same. The winemaker (usually with an experienced team) follows carefully how wine in each barrel is maturing and all of it’s qualities and short comings.

Various experimental combinations are now assembled based on the winemaking team’s knowledge of all the barrels and the desired “winery style” they are attempting to create. When there is agreement on the best combinations, **Assemblage’** can proceed. It begins with racking of selected barrels into different tanks where they can mix together, merge taste and structure, and be prepared for bottling. Usually an estate’s very best barrels, often from several vineyards, go primarily into their tank for their top bottling. Some barrels of the better wine of each vineyard may be assembled into specific tanks and be bottled by vineyard name. Often wine of moderate quality barrels from across the property are assembled and bottled as “estate” wine. Finally, press wine<sup>6</sup> may be elevated with a bit of the wine from better barrels to produce an entry level bottling. And I like to think of the winemaker’s talent and skill as a blend also – *an Assemblage’ of art and science*.

So although Sommelier Alex’s definition of blending did not include the Assemblage’ of various crus<sup>5</sup> of the same varietal, I am sure that he would agree that this is “blending”. Assemblage’ of the final blend at a winery can also, in truth, include different varietals. From our end of the wine business, wine’s consumption, we are grateful for the winemakers efforts to make his best bottles. So let us toast the winemakers’ skills! *Raise your glass - to Assemblage’!*

#### Notes and References:

- 1) Julia Harding, Robinson, J.; The Oxford Companion to Wine, fifth edition, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, UK, 2023.
- 2) Jancis Robinson, Harding, J, Vouillamoz, J; Wine Grapes, A complete guide to 1,368 vine varieties; ECCO, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2012.
- 3) Ian D’Agata; Native Wine Grapes of Italy; Univ of Calif Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles; 2014.
- 4) Spokane Enological Society; Wineminder, November, 2023, “The Art and Science of Wine Blends” presented by Alex Van Amburg, CSW.
- 5) Cuvee’ is the wine from one fermentation vessel and Cru is a single lot or batch of wine, perhaps one barrel, one tank, or even one fermentation vessel.
- 6) Press wine is dark red wine squeezed from grape skins, stem fragments, pulp, and dead yeast left at the tank’s bottom with a press. It is generally more astringent than the free run wine, of lower quality and typically used for lesser bottelings.