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Appel on Wine: Let go of the single-varietal preference, try a messy field blend

By Joe Appel

Most people go through their lives with a subconscious motto: "Take anything from me but my suffering." We ask our ignorance and self-told stories of pain to provide a template, because without them we'd be lost.

Well, wine drinker, your suffering is your insistence on varietal as the chief indicator of a wine's character. "I like Pinot Noir" doesn't really mean anything, for a grape grown in one spot by one person will make a wine vastly different from that same grape grown in another spot by someone else.

Context is everything. Context is life as it's lived, or as it lives, rather than as we plan and hope for everything to shake out. The plans and the hopes are the suffering, truth be told. I prefer the mess over the system; fewer disappointments.

A wine's source can't get messier than in a field blend. As opposed to a cuvee, wherein grapes grown in different vineyards are blended into a final wine after either separated or mixed vinification, field blends are made from multiple varietals that are grown, harvested, crushed and fermented together. It's the way almost all wine used to be made. Though it has largely fallen out of favor, field-blending is practiced at a high and fascinating level in Vienna and, in small pockets, in California.

One of California's pre-eminent field blenders is Acorn Winery in Sonoma's Russian River Valley. Their Alegria vineyards produce fewer than 3,000 cases of estate-grown wine a year, each one a field blend.

"After Prohibition," Acorn winemaker Bill Nachbaur explained to me, "some people in the industry decided they should market wines with a varietal name. And later, wine makers graduating from U.C. Davis (School of Viticulture and Enology) wanted more control of the grapes. They wanted to pick each varietal at peak ripeness and gain more control."

These were largely promotional decisions. But the lineage of more loosely grown wine was never broken. The vineyards that Nachbaur and his wife, Betsy, bought in 1990 hold a dizzying heterogeneity of grapes; visit the winery's website for a fascinating map of what's planted where. The "Zinfandel" vines that date back to 1890 cohabit with Carignane, Trousseau, Syrah, Plavac Mali, Tannat, Peloursin, Beclan and (really) more. "That was typical in the 19th century," Nachbaur said. "They just knew what worked. You can read wine-making guides from the 1880s that say, 'If you plant Zinfandel, be sure to plant Trousseau (for preservative qualities), be sure to plant Petite Sirah for this reason,' and so on."

The Nachbours actively employ sustainable viticultural methods, but none may be more effective than the simple act of letting all those grapes live together. As farmers have known for millennia, field health is harder to maintain with mono-plantings than when different crops' different chemical compositions can complement each other.

“Our vineyards are not as susceptible to mildew and some other conditions because of the mix,” Nachbaur said. “And then, Zinfandel is a notoriously uneven ripener: Some grapes in a single cluster will be green when others are raisiny. Having a mix of other grapes helps mitigate the effects of that.”

If I’m to convince you of my somewhat shaky premise that weaning oneself from a predilection for single varietals will help end a kind of “suffering,” then we need to consider the effects of field blending on what ends up in the glass. And it’s here where Acorn’s wines exude a remarkable luminescence.

These wines are so layered, so accepting and full, they come to you like a long-lost cousin, with deep, primal love spilling out. Some “big” wines express their size in an intimidating, frankly misanthropic manner: You need to prove you’re worthy. Acorn’s bigness is one of heart.

Is that affectionate spirit a result of the field-blend process? Nachbaur says, “I don’t know the chemical explanation, but my guess is that as tannins form into longer molecules, they’re taking a little from this grape, a little from that, and there’s more time to develop more flavor complexity.”

Regardless of the science, such wines align with America’s own history and predicament. Of mixed ancestry, participating in a miscegenated culture with billions of destabilizing info bits assaulting us every second, we may need more wines that can’t be pinpointed. The mess, the mix, is just our facts.

Acorn wines are like comfort food: What you crave when it’s cold out, or you’re sad or tired or lonely. Granted, \$35 is on the high end for comfort food. But maybe that’s in keeping with recent culinary trends that seek to truffle-ize mac-n-cheese or foie-gras-ify a hamburger. So save up a little over the next few weeks and try one of these. (Distributed in Maine by Mariner Beverages.)

Medley 2008, \$38: The field-blendiest of them all: Zin and Cab Franc at 30-odd-percent each, then Syrah, Cinsault, Blue Portuguese, Muscats and more. It truly reflects so many distinct flavors: Grilled things, berries and plums, cinnamon and nutmeg, cocoa and black pepper. Nachbaur is a connoisseur of oak, and my personal preference here would be less oak treatment, which has a kind of pacifying effect on the wine. But I love how it plays with chunky, unblended soups and roasted root vegetables.

Axiom Syrah 2008, \$33: A touch of Viognier is in the Syrah vineyard, and this wine is currently my favorite from Acorn. The oak touch seems lighter, and more mineral components shine through. It’s kind of my vision of northern California farm country in a wine: Dusty chaps, wizened wrinkles, gray mustache. Rich but firm, with complex Syrah notes of bacon, tar, pencil shavings, walnuts and licorice. Great with a red cabbage risotto.

Heritage Vines Zinfandel, \$36: Zin vines planted in 1890 contribute 82 percent of the grapes, abetted by Alicante Bouschet, Petite Sirah, Sangiovese, Negrette and many more. I told Betsy Nachbaur at dinner that it was one of the best Zins I’d ever tasted. Then I tasted from another bottle and felt it was a bit too mellow.

Then the next night I found its sparkle and drive again, and was back to thinking it was best-ever. Maybe that just goes to show how field-blendy we humans are: So inconsistent! But every Zin lover should try this. I love its Turkish-coffee features, its dark raspberry syrup and balsamic-macerated strawberries.

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