

THE AMERICAN WINE SOCIETY

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Extended
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CABERNET & SYRAH

AN UNTRADITIONAL RED BLEND IS EMERGING
FROM A CHECKERED PAST



EDITOR'S LETTER

By Jim Rink

An untraditional red blend is starting to emerge from a checkered past. In this issue of the *Journal*, **Roger Morris** looks at the unlikely combo of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Yes, according to well-established winemakers, Cab Sauv provides beautiful structure while Syrah adds finesse.

Extended maceration is like burnt marshmallows—some winemakers love it, others hate it. **Jack Costa** has the inside scoop on extended maceration and, depending on the grape, the process yields very interesting results. Also in this issue, read **Steve Casscles'** in-depth article on Heritage grape varieties, their history and their potential future contribution in an age of climate change. **Erin Marie Miller** has interviewed Alicia Towns Franken, a Boston-based sommelier who has earned high accolades not only for her wine acumen, but for fostering inclusion and diversity in the community. Longtime contributor and winemaking legend **Gene Spaziani** regales us with a tale of a 12th century bishop who loved a certain Italian wine so much that locals to this day pour a barrel of wine on his grave to honor his memory. Last, but not least, our very own in-house chef **Kevin Harmon** provides us with a different way of cooking under pressure that's not only fun but very tasty, and of course, it involves wine.

Stay thirsty,

J. Rink



Cabernet & Syrah

An untraditional red blend is emerging from a checkered past.

By Roger Morris

At a time when wine blends have enjoyed huge popularity among both winemakers and wine drinkers, will we finally see more of one of the world's best red blends, one that has often defied categorization? That would be the coming together of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, two of the world's best-known red grapes, both widely produced individually as stand-alone varietals and in blends with mostly less-regarded grapes.

While bringing Cab + Syrah together is hardly unknown, the combination is way down on the list of common red blends, plus their history as a wedded couple has been a checkered one. Up until the second half of the last century, Cabernet Sauvignon frequently had difficulty completely ripening in Bordeaux. To compound that problem, winegrowers there would often pick early in fear of fall rains

and mildew, further making the wines both acidic and anemic. This, of course, was not what Bordeaux fans wanted, particularly those in England, and these weak wines threatened the popularity and prices that Bordeaux commanded, then as now.

The magic answer at the time was to transport just-made wine from the south of France and blend a portion of into the unfinished Bordeaux wines, adding color, body, tannins and alcohol. This was at a time when châteaux would ship their young wines in barrels to the merchants in Bordeaux – négociants – to be “elevated” and bottled, a practice that was prevalent until around 70 years ago. The négociants could and did use less-expensive grapes than Syrah, but if they wanted wines from the top châteaux to taste somewhat like a fine Bordeaux blend, then it was worth the price to buy fresh Syrah wine. Of course, this practice was completely illegal and had to be done secretly, although, from time to time someone would be caught, and a scandal would ensue.



WINE FOLLY

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

"Cab-er-nay Saw-vin-yawn"

PROFILE



Born in the Bordeaux Region

Grows well on the smooth, hot plains of
Eastern Paso Robles

Late Ripener

Susceptible to mildew & other diseases

Tannic & ages well

Flavors include fruit, bacon, cedar,
black currant, blackberry, & dark cherry

All photos courtesy of: winefolly.com

Down Under

Australia, having no such blending prohibitions, started in the 1970s to export wines that clearly said on their labels, "Cabernet/Shiraz," Shiraz being their name for Syrah. Even the country's first iconic wine, Penfolds "Grange" (initially called "Grange Hermitage"), was made mainly Shiraz, it would at times have Cabernet added. What Penfolds and other producers quickly found was that there was a market in the U.S. and elsewhere for Cabernet/Shiraz at both the high and low ends. However, the government-fueled plan for Australia to make its wines the most-demanded from New World sources, a strategy which worked marvelously during the 1980s and '90s, ran out of gas and crashed and burned shortly after the turn of the century and a lot of Cab + Shiraz with it.

At about the same time, there was a boomlet of Syrah varietals – not blends – that briefly flourished in the early 2000s on the American West Coast, particularly in Paso Robles. While wine writers (including this one) loved these Syrahs, the buying public yawned and continued to purchase other

wines. After that, most wine marketers didn't want the word "Syrah" on a label, even a blend, although some of it was blended (without mention) with Pinot Noir to help fill the demand for Pinot after the film "Sideways" shamelessly hyped the varietal.

Beyond these developments there has been a perception through the years of a slightly "back alley" aura of Cab + Syrah – a love that dare not speak its name – that intrigued some winemakers and wine drinkers while others saw it as the kiss of economic death. Mostly, Cabernet and Syrah blends have been thought of as love children of these affaires des vignes.

Perhaps part of the fascination, pro and con, about the two also stems from their diverse geographic origins and history, one from cosmopolitan Bordeaux, the other from the rugged Rhone Valley. Further, although both were considered to be "noble grapes" at a time when British writers liked to categorize things by their own monarchical peerage, Bordeaux grapes were



 WINE FOLLY

SYRAH

"Sear-ah"

PROFILE



Born in the Rhone Region

Grows well on the hills and canyons of the cooler west side

Ripens early

Relatively resistant to diseases

Tannic & ages well

Flavors include black pepper, & chocolate

considered more kingly and those of the Rhone more princely, even though Syrah produced the Rhone's most-lauded varietal – Hermitage.

Genetic sleuthing in recent years has traced the ancestors of many vines, the mystery of where these vines were first grown often remains. Syrah is no different, but for centuries its home base has been the northern Rhone Valley. It can be a very prolific grape and one that is relatively disease-resistant, although prone to improper flowering. Conveniently, it ripens early. As grown in the upper Rhone, the flavors of wines made from Syrah are savory, dark and earthy, even like chocolate, accented by black pepper and – yes – occasionally having the aromas of road tar. With its high tannins, Syrah generally ages very well, and, with traditional winemaking protocols, difficult to enjoy in its youth.

Cabernet Sauvignon, by contrast, is a relative newcomer. Researchers at UC Davis in 1997 did genetic fingerprinting and discovered it was the

offspring of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, born in the Bordeaux region in recent centuries. In addition to being a late ripener, which can cause it to have green-tasting characteristics, Cabernet is also susceptible to downy mildew and other diseases. Like Syrah, it has loads of tannins, and its wines are great agers. However, if Rhone-style Syrah, falls on the savory side of the spectrum, Cab Sauv has fruitier characteristics in spite of occasionally being lean with bacon-fat flavors and hints of cedar. In its prime, Cab's flavors include black currants, blackberries, dark cherries and sometime over-ripe plums.

Not surprisingly, the temptation for winemakers to blend the two grapes is most likely to occur in those areas where both grapes grow well. One such area hospitable to both varieties is Paso Robles. Although the delineation may be a bit of a cliché, Cabernet Sauvignon grows well on the smooth, hot plains that rise on Paso's East Side, while Syrah grows well in the hills and canyons of the cooler West Side.

Austin Hope

Two decades ago, a young Austin Hope seized the opportunity to blend the two at a time when the family business was just turning from growing grapes to making wine. Against advice from his family and from retailers, he decided to make a Cab-Syrah blend

at a time that even trying to sell any red blend to a varietal-happy American public was risky.

“From the first time we started blending ‘Treana Red’ in 1996, we noticed how well Syrah complemented Cabernet,” Hope says today. “We definitely had many people look at us differently, not only for creating a red table blend of Cabernet and Syrah, but also for the price of \$40 [for a wine from] from a very unknown region, Paso Robles.” Hope adds, “We have been ahead of the curve on things through our time, and red blends at premium prices were not heard of during this time frame.”

But Hope felt the reward was worth the risk, both from the way the two grapes were similar and how they complemented the other where different. “Both varieties are considered to have good tannins with rich fruit,” he says, “although I have always felt Cabernet can be more front-loaded on the palate and less so on the mid-palate. Syrah has such a lush, rich mid-palate that it seems to fill in what Cabernet does not have. When these two are blended together, it shows a seamless mouth feel from start to finish, although the tannins have different textures,” Hope says. “The Cabernet is more grainy/grippy up front, and the Syrah brings more polished tannins across the mid-palate.”

Hope says that the tannins in the two grapes do not ripen at the same time in Paso Robles vineyards, so he picks each separately as soon as they are phenologically ripe and then ferments them individually. “We began putting them together after malic fermentation is done and we do our first racking,” he explains.

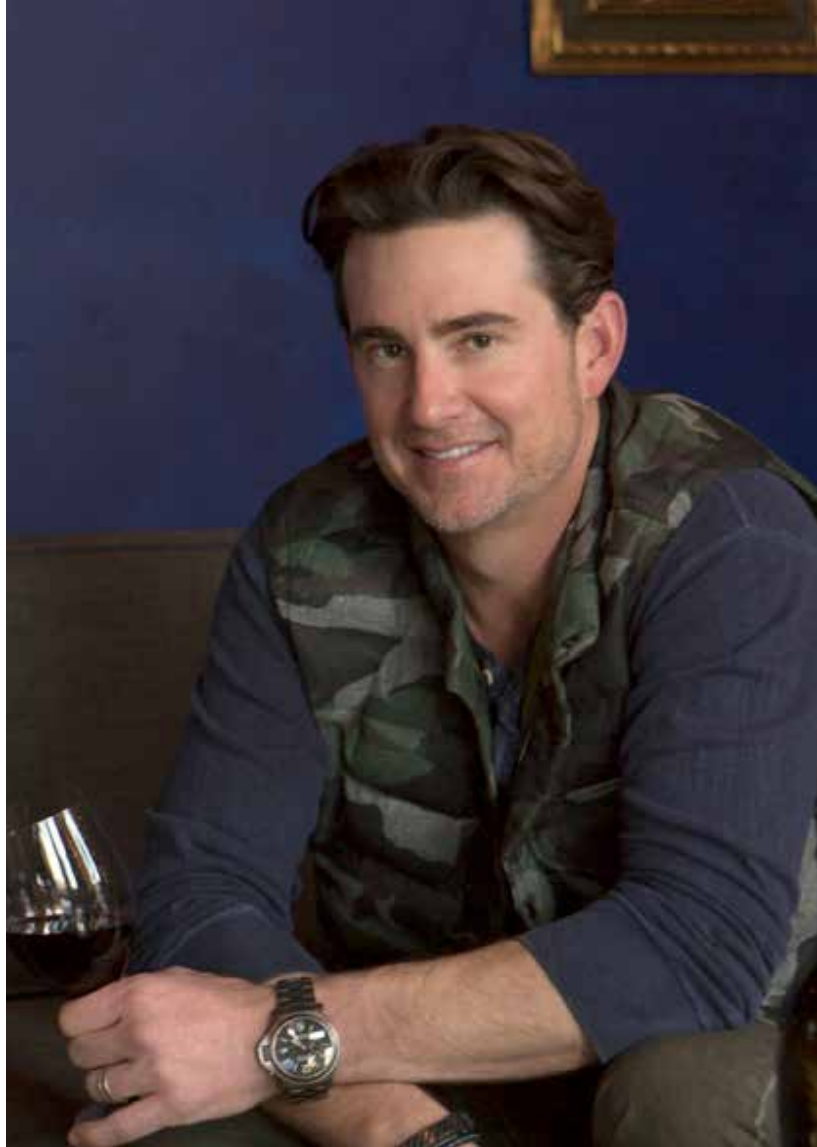


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Photo courtesy of: charlessmithwines.com

Charles Smith

By thinking differently in many winemaking aspects, Charles Smith was one of the first to show great wines could be made in eastern Washington State. A former rock band manager who looks the part – untamed sheaths of graying hair framing dark glasses – Smith is one of the most-

pleasant, most-talented and hardest-working people

in the business, producing multiple wine labels. He started with a 2001 K Vintners Walla Walla Cabernet Syrah release and showed that the two could be grown in the same rock-strewn vineyards.

His approach to winemaking is quite different than Hope's or than most people. For his Charles Smith "The Creator" Walla Walla Cabernet Syrah, "I pick everything at the same time and co-ferment, using whole berries for the Cab and whole clusters for the Syrah," Smith said recently on a Zoom conversation. "So it's all spontaneous fermentation. Everything is blended from the start – vineyard to bottle."

For the blend, he usually uses about 80% Cab and 20% to 30% Syrah, depending on the vintage, rather than doing it half-and-half. "It's like a dance," he says. "One of them has to lead." As far as what each gives to the blend, Smith says, "Cabernet Sauvignon always has beautiful structure, while Syrah gives the wine finesse."

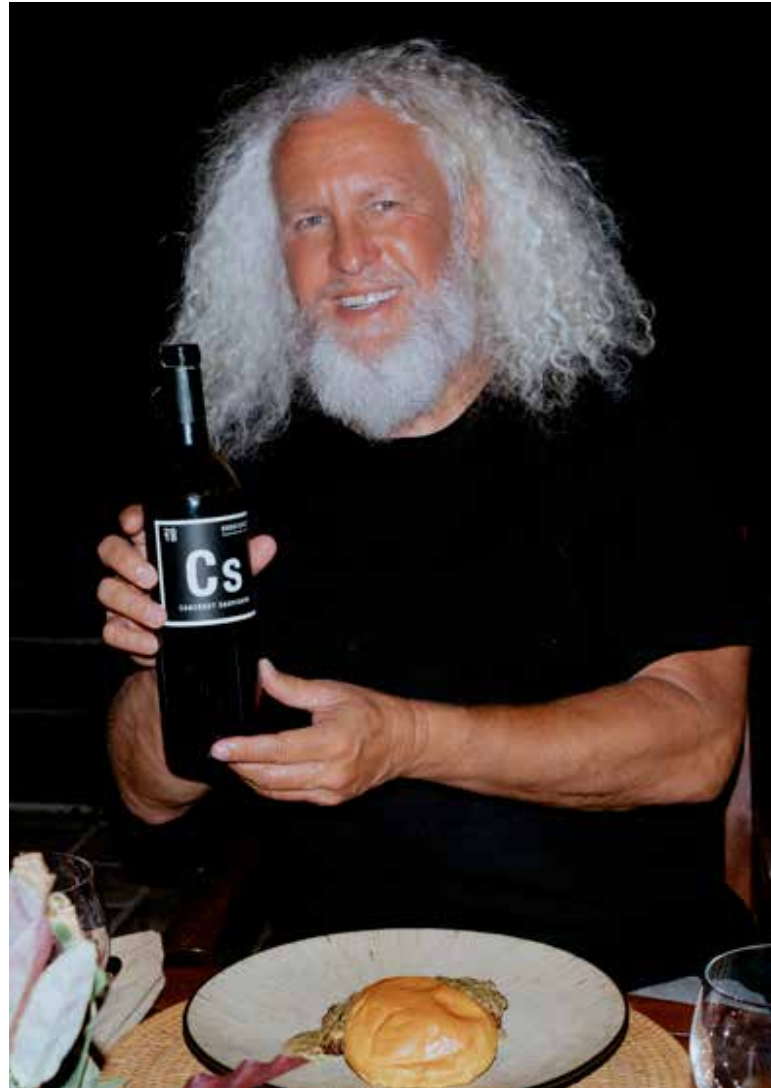


Photo courtesy of: charlessmithwines.com



Photo courtesy of: penfolds.com

Peter Gago

As chief winemaker at Penfolds, Peter Gago has the opportunity to oversee the production of Cab + Syrah blends in both Australia and California. “We started buying land in California in the late 1990s” in the Paso Robles area, Gago said in a recent Zoom interview, with the vines coming from prime Penfolds Australian vineyards. The company has since has acquired more land and buys fruit from other producers, some owned by other Treasury Wine Estates wineries. Gago’s 2018 Penfolds “Bin 600” California Shiraz is 78% Cabernet and 22% Shiraz, with grapes coming from both Paso and Sonoma. “I think the sweet spot for the blends is two-thirds Cabernet and one-third Shiraz,” Gago says.

“We want ‘Bin 600’ to be similar to our other super-blends, coming out two or three times a decade,” he says. He refers to the Australian blend – “Bin 389” – as “our workhorse.” There is also a Penfolds Koonunga blend that is sold at the entry-level price of less than \$20, a good discovery point for anyone who hasn’t tasted a Cab + Syrah blend to begin.

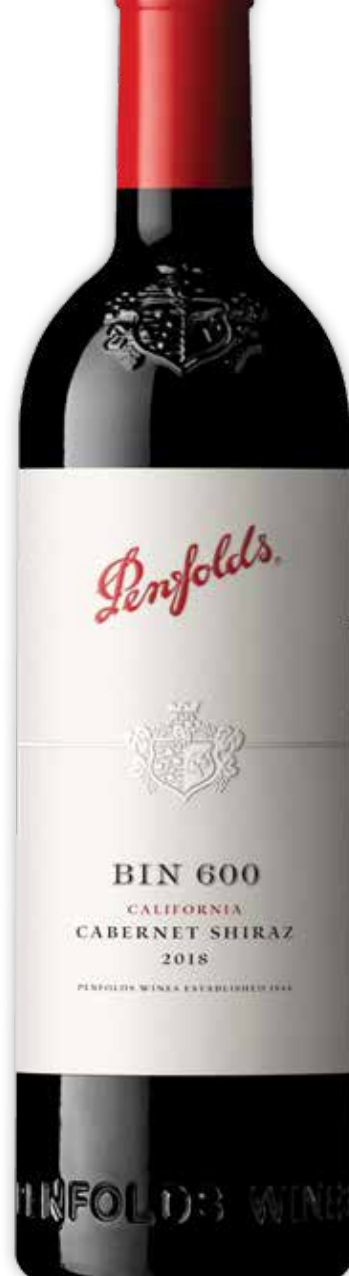


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By this point in the article, fans of one of the world’s best Cab + Syrah blends, Domaine de Trévallon, may have been wondering if this special place, which has made a red blend for three-quarters of a century, has been overlooked. It has not. Located on limestone-and-clay terroir between Arles from Avignon, Trévallon was planted in the early 1950s by the Dürrback family, who noted at the time that Cabernet had successfully being grown in the area before phylloxera.

Like most great wines, it is quite expensive. The most-recent vintage is a 50-50 blend of Cab and Syrah grapes that were not de-stemmed before fermentation, which was spontaneous without yeast being added. It was aged in large and small oak with egg-white fining (the old-fashioned way) with no filtering before bottling. Trévallon is the kind of wine you seek out to taste at least once.

Naturally, there remains a certain longing for Syrah among some Bordeaux winemakers. While Syrah can be grown there, it can’t be used in any wine called “Bordeaux.” But if Syrah returns to Bordeaux, as many think makes sense because of climate change, it will be likely be just another component in Bordeaux blends along with other grapes in addition to Cabernet Sauvignon.



Super Bordeaux

Which is what Thomas Duroux does at Château Palmer with what could be called his “Super Bordeaux” Vin de France blend. Duroux calls his wine “Historical XIXth Century Wine” followed by a date designation. I tasted the “2004,” the first vintage, when I had lunch at Palmer during the 2009 en primeur barrel tastings, and later sampled the 2006. I have not tasted the latest vintage, and Duroux doesn’t produce “Historical” every vintage.

“I get the Syrah as a finished wine in January or February after the harvest,” Duroux told me when I tasted the first editions. “I have several sources in the Rhone – 50 liters here, 100 liters there – and make a few hundred cases.” He prefers Rhones from the North – Cornas, Saint-Joseph, Hermitage, Côte-Rôtie – and finds Châteaufort-du-Pape blends to be “too massive and not refined enough.” Whatever the source, the Rhone and Palmer wines are married in barrels for seven months. The 2016 blend consists of 10% Rhone Syrah with 45% Merlot, 45% Cabernet Sauvignon from Palmer.

The other major Bordeaux-based (if not actually “Bordeaux”) blend comes from Château La Lagune, whose owner, the Frey family, also owns Domaine Paul Jaboulet Aîné in the Rhone region. Caroline Frey made her first experimental blend, originally called “Duo by Caroline,” with the 2010 vintage and later ramped up production. It is now called “Evidence by Caroline” and is affordably priced.

With the commercial success and critical reviews of Cab + Syrah blends in France, Australia and the U.S., will other winemakers who love blending jump on the bandwagon? Already there are dozens of these blends being made from South Africa to Chile, but the fact that so few American producers make a Cabernet + Syrah remains a bit puzzling. “I have often wondered why there are not more blends,” Tom Gamble says. “I can only figure that it’s a traditional thing that Bordeaux and Rhone grapes have historically never been blended.” With “Treana” selling at about \$40 a bottle, “The Creator” at \$55, “Bin 600” at \$50, “Bin 389” at \$60+, Trévallon at \$120 and Palmer’s “Historical” at \$300, the temptation to defy tradition and produce a Cab + Syrah blend may seem to have more upside than **downside**.



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About the Author

In addition to the Journal, Roger Morris writes about wine, food and travel for numerous publications including World of Fine Wine, Wine Enthusiast, Drinks Business and Beverage Media. During the first two decades of this century, the Delaware-based Morris has made more than 100 reporting trips to wine regions on five continents.

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