

RED ROGUES
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PLUMPJACK
WINES

What do Dom Perignon, Chateau Beaucastel, Opus One, and Sassacia have in common (other than being very expensive)? They are all blends! We are huge fans of blends and recognize that some of the most famous wines in the world are blends.

This quarter we have selected three blended wines which are delicious, affordable, and slightly off the beaten path. The wines are La Bastide Saint Vincent Vacqueyras, Atamisque Assemblage, and The Chocolate Block.

Some argue that often a 100% varietal wine can end up being one-dimensional, and grapes from vineyards do not always provide all of the needed characteristics to make an interesting, complex wine.

Gen X Magazine says, "Blending wine is like trying to set up friends for a blind date. You know them both individually, and they seem like they'd get along great, but you never completely know until you put them together."

A key component to blending is the winemaker's ability to make the blended wine better than any of the single components. Blending takes an enormous amount of patience, skill, enthusiasm, and vision. Adding a mere 10% Merlot to soften a Cabernet blend may soften it too much, or not enough. Adding 20% Malbec to that same wine may make it too juicy but lacking structure. We have only touched the surface in how decisions are made in a winery, but many wines that we drink are blends in one capacity or another, even if only blended from different lots of the same varietal.

The wines we have chosen have at least two commonalities. 1st they are all blends, and 2nd they all have French connections. Another interesting fact about these three wines is that the oak treatment for each of these wines is completely different. One uses absolutely no oak treatment, one uses 100% new French oak, and one uses second and third year barrels.

2007 LA BASTIDE SAINT VINCENT, PAVANE VACQUEYRAS - \$24.99

The Rhone Valley, south of Burgundy and north of Provence, is one of the largest wine-growing areas in all of France. The Rhone area is known for its long, hot, dry days, and the grapes are perfectly suited for this typical Mediterranean climate. It is distinctly divided into two separate growing areas, which feature different varietals, climates, and soils. The five northern Rhone appellations feature Syrah for the red wines and Viognier for the white wines, while the southern Rhone is made up of eleven different appellations, with Cotes du Rhone being the largest and most affordable. The varietals that are grown and can be included in the wines from southern Rhone are Grenache, Syrah, Cinsault, Mourvedre, Counoise, Muscardin, Terret Noir, and Vaccaresse. The white varietals that are produced in the southern Rhone Valley are Rousanne, Grenache Blanc, Bourboulenc, Picardin, and Picpoul.

Following in the same footsteps as its close neighbor Gigondas, Vacqueyras (pronounced VAH-keh-rahss) received its AOC appellation in 1990. Vacqueyras is located toward the southern end of the Rhone Valley and just north of Beaumes-de-Venise. Vacqueyras may use any of the above 13 types of grapes, but at least 50% of the blend must be Grenache. In contrast, Gigondas must contain at least 80% Grenache. By law the rest of the Vacqueyras blend may be made up of any of the other grapes including white grapes. However the most common blends are similar to the wines of Chateauneuf du Pape, using Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvedre.

Our featured Vacqueyras from La Bastide St Vincent, named after the patron saint of winemakers, has been owned by the Daniel family since the 1700's. Today they own approximately 50 acres throughout the Rhone Valley. The blend of this elegant, rich wine is 75% Grenache, 20% Syrah, and 5% Mourvedre. The Grenache gives the wine its spiciness and berry components, the Syrah gives the wine its texture, color, and blueberry components, and the Mourvedre gives the wine its powerful structure. Guy Daniel hand picks the grapes and keeps the best for his wines and sells the rest in bulk. This wine sees no oak treatment at all.

Robert Parker says, "Guy's wines exhibit sweet cassis and blackberry notes, with smoke and charcoal. Displaying a larger than life personality, this full-bodied wine possesses plenty of glycerin, density, and richness as well as decent acidity and ripe tannin." Our tasting notes include a ripe berry and saddle leather aroma with an opaque purple color. The flavors are dense, without being overly tannic, with a big mouth-feel. The finish is slightly rustic but also a hint of elegance shows through. I immediately went back for another taste. This would pair perfectly with a roasted leg of lamb or your favorite game dish. I would also pair it with a gorgonzola or triple cream cheese. It will age for another 3-5 years.

2007 ATAMISQUE, ASSEMBLAGE - \$34.99

Our second blend is from Argentina, at the base of the Andes Mountains, in the Mendoza area, south of Tupungato in the Uco Valley. Uco Valley, which is 45 miles from Mendoza City, has a semi-desert like climate and a wide temperature range from the day to night, perfect for growing grapes. The nearby Tupungato Volcano, is the 2nd highest peak in Mendoza at an altitude of 20,100 feet.

The Uco Valley, similar to the San Joaquin Valley in California, is a huge agricultural valley growing much of the produce for Argentina. Atamisque Winery has more than 1,700 acres and grows not only grapes, but pears, apples, cherries, walnuts, chestnuts, and hazelnuts on the property.

The Jesuits founded Estancia San Jose in the 1600's, and nurtured the farming community. This estancia changed hands many times and today is owned by Frenchman, John du Monceau and his wife Chantal, who fell in love with the place the minute they saw it just a few years ago. This estancia now houses Atamisque Winery, producing its debut vintage from the 2007 harvest.

The high-tech, modern facility, has a capacity for 55,000 cases of wine annually, and boasts of a unique gabled structure with a slate roof, aping the magical Chateaux from the French and Italian Alps. The winery was designed to be in tune with gravity so that the vinification process would follow the natural fall and flow requiring no use of pumps. They proudly use top quality French cooperage from both Vosges and Nevers, aging their wine in barrel for up to 14 months before bottling.

The blend is 50% Malbec, 25% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 25% Merlot, and the grapes are grown from vineyards at elevations of 3,600 to 4,300 feet. The vines are cultivated on a hillside sloping down from the Andean mountain range, which provides a diverse mix of soil types including alluvial, rock foundations, and top layers of sand-textured earth.

The color of the wine is most impressive in that it's ruby red with purple hues. The berry quality from the Malbec is apparent from the initial taste and lingers with cherry and ripe strawberry notes, along with mint and eucalyptus. The first sip offers dark, dense, slightly jammy red fruit with cocoa on the back palate. There is some amount of spiciness in the mid-palate, but the surprise is that the wine is a big monster bursting with vanilla, coffee, and hazelnuts and a superb, lingering finish. This is not a wine for the faint of heart, and will age for 7-12 years. I recommend a big hearty meat dish, like steak au poive. Decant before serving or open it a good 45-60 minutes before drinking.

2008 THE CHOCOLATE BLOCK - \$35.99

Our final blend is from Boekenhoutskloof in South Africa—try pronouncing that name three times quickly. It's pronounced book-n-howed-s-kloof. A Boekenhout is a Cape birch tree used for producing high quality furniture.

The history of winemaking in South Africa dates back to 1652 when a doctor convinced the Dutch East India Company to plant grapes to relieve the symptoms of scurvy. Nine years later wine was produced and pressed from grapes grown on cuttings brought from France.

The Boekenhoutskloof is one of the oldest farms in the vicinity of Franschhoek, and has undergone a series of owners since 1776. The original property consisted of about 100 acres and was used solely for cattle pastures. However, as the owners changed, the property was turned into vineyards and orchards, and has been used agriculturally for more than 150 years. The current ownership group is led by Marc Kent, named the 2007 Winemaker of the year in South Africa. The group purchased the property in 1993, and currently has approximately 50 acres planted to grapes. The winery was named South Africa's #1 producer in 2009 by Robert Parker.

Although not an original partner in the investment group, Marc Kent was made a partner in 1998, and continues to be the heart and soul of the winery. Marc had the good fortune to work at a restaurant called the Black Marlin near Cape Point, where the owner was an extremely knowledgeable and generous wine enthusiast. By age 22 Marc had tasted many vintages of all of the first-growths, as well as Chateau Petrus, Domaine Romanee Conti, and many others. He then attended Elsenburg Agricultural College in Cellar Technology. His passion is Syrah, and he has followed and studied the wines from the Northern Rhone, especially from the Cornas area. It comes as no great surprise that he has become a master blender of wines at the property, as they grow Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc. They also grow white wine grapes which include Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, and Semillon.

The blend for the Chocolate Block, which has become their most well-known wine, is 69% Syrah, 12% Grenache Noir, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Cinsault, and 2% Viognier. The Syrah fruit comes from dry-farmed vineyards in Malmesbury to ensure optimal concentration of color, flavor, and tannin structure. The Grenache Noir (from some of the oldest vines in the country) is sourced from Citrusdal, with its very sandy soils and perfect terroir for ripening Grenache. The Cabernet Sauvignon and Viognier come from the organically-farmed vineyards of the Boekenhoutskloof, and the Cinsault is from old-bush vines on decomposed granite soils on Welbedacht, in Wellington.

The wine matures in older French barrels—not new—for 15 months, and then goes through a light egg-white fining. Another deeply colored wine, it is opaque, deep purple, with lavender tinges at the edge of the glass. A meaty, spicy, Syrah nose leaps out of the glass, with flavors of ripe plum and black fruit and hints of violet; the mid-palate explodes with juiciness (but not jammy) and the word chocolate delivers in taste as well as name. The finish is long and pleasant with subtle tannins. Wow!! This wine has aging potential of 3-7 years, but I love it now. Pair it with a juicy hamburger or grilled meat on the barbecue.