

# Balancing Act

## CALIFORNIA RED BLENDS WITH PERSONALITY

by Meg Houston Maker

In an ideal terroir, mono-varietals can sing. Think Pinot Noir in Burgundy, Nebbiolo in Piedmont, Nerello Mascalese on the slopes of Mount Etna. The grape is matched to place, a tuning fork for terroir.

But in many other great wine regions—Bordeaux, the Rhône, much of Spain and Italy—weather and place often conspire against varietals. To produce a wine of harmony, blending is the norm (and, often, the law).

“Red blends are especially useful under two sets of conditions,” opines Bonny Doon Vineyard winemaker Randall Grahm: “a less than fully articulate (or vivid) terroir, and/or a (mostly) Mediterranean climate.” Through careful grape selection, a winemaker can craft wines with good proportions, compensating for the vagaries of heat, drought—whatever.

Since the mid-1980s, Grahm has been staining his blending bench with grapes like Grenache, Syrah, Cinsault and Mourvèdre in California’s Central Coast. “In the case of Rhône blends,” Grahm continues, “Grenache is the star of the show, but often high in alcohol and intensely fruity. The presence of Cinsault and Syrah will add exotic top-notes as well as diminish the alcohol, bringing the wine into balance.” His newest red blend mixes seven grapes in all. Grahm calls it “A Proper Claret.” He also calls it “a balancing act.”

Of course, a blended wine needs more than technical equilibrium to be crowd pleasing. It needs the more ineffable qualities like harmony and deliciousness, not to mention marketability. We all know it’s easier to sell a varietal wine than a blend, because a grape on a label gives a customer confidence about what’s inside. Yet a blend can have a strong personality, worth discovering.

These new blends from California are a case in point. Some skew juicy and fun, friendly on release and great for whatever’s on the table on Wednesday night. Others are made in a structured style, serious wines for white linens or long aging.

The whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.



**Bonny Doon Vineyard 2014 A Proper Claret, California (\$16)**

A seven-grape cuvée based on Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot and Tannat, it blooms with raspberry juice, cherries and black currants. Great for a cheese plate.



**Morgan Winery 2014 Cotes du Crow's, Monterey (\$18)**

About equal parts Grenache and Syrah, this peppery blend suggests rare meat, pink flowers and raspberries with a kick of spice. Rambunctious and youthful.



**Atlas Wine Co. 2014 Omen Red Blend, Sierra Foothills (\$20)**

Terrifically refreshing, with a breeze of juniper and eucalyptus over ripe blue and red fruits. Who knew Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and Merlot made great bedfellows?



**Gundlach Bundschu 2013 Mountain Cuvée, Sonoma County (\$20)**

This chewy, cherry-berry blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec is threaded with ornaments from barrel aging. Good structure for roasted meats.



**Son of a Butcher 2014 Red Wine, California (\$20)**

An homage to Gascony kissed by California sunshine, this Tannat-based wine includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. The effect is cocoa-y brambleberries dusted with herbs.



**Dry Creek Vineyard 2012 Meritage The Mariner, Dry Creek Valley (\$45)**

A Meritage based on Cabernet Sauvignon, with a sleek ruby-purple body yielding a fragrance of pinewoods and blackberries spiked with fragrant spices.



**Hourglass 2014 HG III Red Blend, Napa Valley (\$50)**

A blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah, it reads like black fruits steeped in coffee. Boxy muscularity makes it age-worthy.



**Gallica 2013 Suzuri Red Wine, Shake Ridge Ranch, Amador County (\$50)**

This GSM has a soupçon of Viognier, a nod toward Côte-Rôtie that lifts notes of black plum and cured game with hints of white stone fruit and petals. Polished and exquisite. ■■