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## Blend ambition



Jancis Robinson

‘As far as we neophyte blenders were concerned, it was just a question of getting the proportions right’

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Bordeaux’s most admired consultant oenologist was enough to demonstrate that I have a long way to go in this respect.

The genesis of this humbling experience lies in Japan. Just before Christmas last year, Simon Staples — Tokyo-based sales director for Berry Bros & Rudd — was sitting in the reception of an office in Ginza waiting to see his most important Japanese client. Through him, this chap had ordered a barrel of both 2012 and 2014 red bordeaux made to his instructions to celebrate the birth years of his daughters, and was already planning to have the wines served in magnums at their weddings. What got Staples thinking was the client’s special request to have the wine labels incorporate drawings by his elder daughter.

Berry and Staples have long been enthusiastic supporters of Room to Read, a charity that promotes literacy in the developing world (and subject of the FT’s seasonal appeal in 2009). Staples thought how exciting it would be to have a special wine sold in aid of the charity and decorated with labels designed by some of the children whose lives have been improved by it.

He contacted Stephen Bolger, who runs Viniv, the custom crush facility with its own top quality winemaking facilities that is co-owned by Bolger and the Cazes family of Château Lynch-Bages in Pauillac. Berry Bros are the UK and Hong Kong agents for Viniv, which offers well-heeled hobby vigneron the chance to make their own wine, advised by the oenologist Eric Boissenot and the technical staff at Lynch-Bages. Viniv had supplied the wine for Staples’ matrimonially

minded Ginza client and it seemed logical to blend a Room to Read wine from the grape sources that have been sought out by the Franco-American Bolger.

With the next Room to Read fundraising wine galas in Tokyo and Singapore scheduled for April, there was no time to hold a children's art competition for the initial bottling of a 2013. The launch label had therefore been designed already and the name — Widely Read — decided upon by the time Staples and I met on the last evening of March in the tasting room at Viniv with a hard day's tasting of 2014 primeurs behind us.

Boissenot is as shy as Staples is the opposite. So when we began to taste the eight possible ingredients lined up by Bolger, it was Staples who dominated the conversation.

Coming late to the whole exercise, I expected to have to try to make a silk purse out of the many sows' ears remaining from the less-than-splendid 2013 vintage. I was agreeably surprised to find that our samples — rather than being a ragbag of offcuts from the lowliest appellation AOC Bordeaux, which is generally applied to the sea of red wine made in the pretty but undistinguished Entre Deux Mers region — came from appellations as grand as Pauillac, St-Emilion, Haut-Médoc and Graves.



We were each issued with a blending template, a grid that suggested we might have to try up to 14 different permutations of the eight samples: three Merlots, two Cabernet Francs and three Cabernet Sauvignons. We started with the Merlots. The one from Côtes de Castillon was a bit too weedy, a bit too obviously a 2013. But the one from Canon Fronsac, the appellation west of Pomerol that tends to be criminally overlooked nowadays, was delicious — really plump and attractive but with structure too. Bolger told us it comes from a plot “on the top of the natural amphitheatre at the highest point of the appellation (limestone, baby!)”. We decided we would use as much of this as was available.

We then tried the two Cabernet Francs, a grape that can be aggressively herbaceous in less-than-fully-ripe vintages. We much preferred the one that came from St-Emilion vines above Château Faugères and not far from prototype “garage wine” Château Valandraud. And the standout Cabernet Sauvignon, not surprisingly perhaps, was the one from just down the road in Pauillac, next to Château Pichon Baron.

As far as neophyte blenders Simon Staples and I were concerned, it was just a question of getting the proportions of these three ingredients right. Since, because of remaining stocks, the maximum allowed of the excellent Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon were respectively 54 and 34 per cent of the final blend, surely just making it up with 12 per cent of our preferred Cabernet Franc would do the trick?

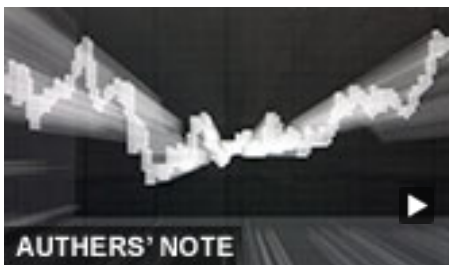
The Viniv staff got to work with measuring cylinders and presented us with that blend — but Boissenot was looking doubtful. He wanted us to try a dash of the third Merlot, the one from St-Emilion that we felt was a bit too tannic. Well, he does advise on the blending of most of the classed growths, including several first growths, so we shut up and tried a blend that incorporated 4 per cent of this Merlot. To our amazement, and slight chagrin, he was right. This was a new, improved version of “our” wine. Job done. Surely that would do? We had a rather good dinner in prospect after all.

But Boissenot was not satisfied. He thought 14 per cent Cabernet Franc was too much, so we experimented with decreasing proportions of it. In the end we were convinced — who wouldn't be? — so the final blend of Widely Read 2013 is 54 per cent Merlot from Canon Fronsac, 4 per cent Merlot and 10 per cent Cabernet Franc from St-Emilion, and 32 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon from Pauillac. The blend may qualify only as AOC Bordeaux because it incorporates wines from both the left and right banks of the Gironde but it has an outstanding pedigree, and was blended according to the highest standards. Ahem.

Last month, 144 six-bottle cases were pre-ordered at the Tokyo and Singapore Room to Read wine galas, leaving 336 six-bottle cases to be sold at future events and by Berry Bros online. This toothsome blend will be delivered early next year when it should just be starting to come into its own. I recommend it.

*Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com*

*Illustration by Ingram Pinn*



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