

THE **SOMM** JOURNAL

blending in to **STAND OUT**

**TOP WINEMAKERS WEIGH IN
ON THE COMPLEXITY OF AN
IMPORTANT TECHNIQUE**

*Girard Winery
winemaker
Glenn Hugo.*

An aerial view of the Clos de los Siete “campus” in Argentina.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEUTSCH FAMILY WINES



by Lars Leicht

Several years ago, when he was a restaurant wine buyer and I worked for a national importer, Theo Rutherford and I had a memorable discussion about the nuances of wine blending. Now that we're both in wine education roles—he as the senior manager, wine and spirits education, for Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits and me as VP of education for *The SOMM Journal*—we took the opportunity to turn that conversation into a webinar we co-hosted last October; joined by James MacPhail of The Calling in Sonoma, Glenn Hugo of Girard Winery in Napa, and renowned “flying winemaker” Michel Rolland.

Though they have different priorities and goals, all three winemakers use the same technique to meet their objectives: blending. As Rutherford posed questions to uncover the commonalities in and distinctions between their work, Rolland was quick to clear up a fundamental misconception regarding the technique. “Some think that when [a winemaker relies on] just one variety . . . he or she is not blending,” he pointed out. “Yes, we are blending, because we can have different lots . . . so blending is absolutely necessary to make wine.”

MacPhail, who blends different Sonoma vineyard and barrel lots for his The Calling Pinot Noir, noted that the process begins well before the literal act of blending. “A lot of people think that blending is when we're sitting down at a big table with 100 glasses—you know, a little of this and a little of that,” he said. “For me it really starts in the vineyard, with the different sites that lend themselves to different flavor components.”



James MacPhail
is winemaker at
Sonoma County
winery The Calling.



for the wine's style . . . coming from the soil and from the location."

Blending Varieties

There are, of course, many elements involved in blending, starting with grape selection. Hugo likes to "work on the complexity" of the Girard Cabernet Sauvignon at the same time as he makes Artistry, a unique blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, and Petit Verdot, because he views the two wines as complementary. "Some Cabernets will work better in Artistry than the Girard Cabernet Sauvignon," he said. "I'm always thinking about other varieties that can mix in to add nuances. We don't want to change it from being a Cabernet blend necessarily, but . . . just the smallest amount of [Petit Verdot] can change a blend and add a lot of complexity."

Rolland's Clos de los Siete—the result of a cooperative project involving four Bordeaux winemaking families and wineries on the same vast property, which they refer to as "the campus," in Argentina—is also a blend of multiple varieties; roughly 50% Malbec, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, and 10% Syrah, it can vary from vintage to vintage and in recent years has included small amounts of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. The fact that it is also "a blend of wineries," said Rolland, makes for "the most complicated blending you can imagine" and thus "a perfect example" of the process: He sits with each of the four partners four times a year to come up with their contributing blend, then works with them all together to determine the final blend. No wonder he compared blending to a workout: "Blending is my cardio."

Hugo echoed that sentiment. "When we sit down to a bunch of samples in front of us and start breaking out the beakers and working on what percentage of what—so much work went into getting to that point, to get all the different selections," he said. "I think we all want to walk up to that table at that moment and have as much variety to work with as possible. We start early in the process, thinking about all the sub-AVAs in our region. Having all these different sources [is] a big part of putting all the tools in our toolbox."

Rutherford asked the winemakers if they blended for a certain style. Hugo, pointing out that he came from the restaurant industry, said he strives for food-friendly wines: "I'm thinking about wine on the dinner table. We're looking at that balance of acidity, tannin, fruit, and the combination of

oak we use to accomplish all those things." MacPhail, meanwhile, stated his goal as varietal typicity. "To me Pinot Noir is all about the layers," he said, adding that each vineyard is akin to a color on a painter's palette. When the right mixture is achieved, a portrait of Pinot emerges: "It's supposed to evoke emotion, it's supposed to evoke thought, it's supposed to be stimulating in a lot of different ways."

Rolland emphasized that while winemakers might have certain goals, they shouldn't impose a thumbprint. "Obviously you are not looking for your signature; you are looking for the best wine you can make in the place you are," he declared. "Our goal is not to look for our style—our goal is to look



Blending Vintages and Appellations

Most California appellations allow for the inclusion of up to 5% wine from a vintage other than that declared on the label and up to 15% from areas other than the declared appellation. Both MacPhail and Hugo appreciate that flexibility.

MacPhail said that for his platinum-level, vineyard designate-tier Pinot Noir, which sees 15–16 months in French oak, he'll often consider blending a small percent-

age of the current vintage into the aged wine before bottling: "It's just enough to make it more fresh, more lively, to spark it up a bit."

Hugo too uses younger vintages to impart freshness and youthful character and older ones to add depth and complexity. "That can have a tremendous impact on the overall quality of the wine," Hugo said. "Just playing with something that adds a little bit of texture, complexity, fruit-forwardness, tannin structure, or acidity ... is a really useful tool."

Blending Barrels

MacPhail pointed out that the delicate nature of Pinot Noir dictates that he use barrels that are custom made for the variety, endowing more elegant character due to their medium to low toast, staves bent by water or steam rather than fire, wood source, and/or cooperage. He said he constantly experiments with wood and is currently conducting about 20 separate barrel trials. "In the art of blending, that's one more component to the winemaking that gives those layers," he explained, as different barrels impart different characteristics into the wine.

Rolland declared that, in general, the

quality and consistency of wine barrels as well as the variations that can be made for specific varieties and types of wine have improved dramatically in recent years—and therefore so have blends: "We are much better off than we were 30 years ago."

Considering Climate Change

Rolland views climate change as more of a phenomenon than a crisis, at least when it comes to winemaking. He believes it is easier to make better blends today than four decades ago because grapes ripen better, making for better component wines, though the steady increase in alcohol levels is a concern.

MacPhail identified the impact of warming temperatures on Pinot Noir: "Obviously Pinot Noir needs the sun to ripen, but it does not like the heat," he said. Observing that over the past decade harvest has come earlier, he also sees positive aspects to the warmth: "It's about tempering it and managing it, but it is still giving us some pretty incredible fruit and flavors to work with" when blending.

Hugo said recent wildfires have influenced his practices. "We're all just sitting on pins and needles hoping we don't have to deal with that again," he added, noting



his hesitancy to delay harvest for fear of fires coming through. "It's pushing us to make decisions that we would have looked at differently in the past, for sure."

Complex Choices

Rolland said the final blend should be greater than the sum of its parts. "That's the magical thing about blending: There is no magic, just hard work, a lot of tasting, and a lot of understanding of what is happening in the blend. We have to find the right synergy between the wines," he continued. "People think we need to take the best and blend the best to have the best wine. It's not true. Sometimes we have to blend something that is not really the best, but it makes a really good synergy in the final blend."

Hugo agreed that certain lots may not impress on their own but turn out to make the blend better: "They have nuances to them that don't make them a complete wine, but in a blend they add so much to the overall complexity of a wine," he said, characterizing them as "donut hole fillers."

"There is a lot of complexity to blending," he added. "It starts with the grapes in the vineyard and continues all the way through to the bottle. Every step of the way there are nuances."

Despite its challenges, none of these winemakers would give up their seat in the game, especially Rolland, the most experienced of the three. The globetrotting winemaker put it succinctly: "Blending is my life." S



Consultant and "flying winemaker" Michel Rolland created Argentina's Clos de los Siete as a cooperative project involving four Bordelaise winemaking families and wineries.