

Red Blends

Inspired by Old World benchmarks, consumers are slowly starting to embrace non-single-varietal red wines.

Liza B. Zimmerman

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THE BULK OF THE world's wine producers have historically produced blended wines according to the traditions and terroir of their lands. Many of the longest producing of the New World vintners—think Chile and South Africa—have also long turned out heavy-hitting and food-friendly red blends that allow them to change up the grape varietal to reflect harvest conditions and different winemakers' taste profiles.

According to the Chicago-based **IRI Group**, which tracks sales in supermarkets, drugstores, gas/convenience stores, convenience stores and mass market retailers, the percent change for dollar sales was up by 24.68 percent to \$298.5 million for red blends in the year ending August 7, 2011.

Informal observations from on-premise sources also report similar increases. **Ronn Wiegand**, Napa-based publisher and editor of *Restaurant Wine*, noted that he has “seen many more red blends in wine programs, especially by the glass, than ever before and especially those that wholesale for under \$160 a case.” He added that many also come from California and Italy, with emerging markets in Spain, Argentina, Chile and Portugal. He also estimated that “on-premise sales for this category overall are growing at 10 percent-plus per year overall—but in the moderate-priced category, they are growing at a major clip, around 20 percent per year.”

One of the benefits of blends is that “within the world of blended wine there is more flexibility and less risk for the winemaker,” according to **Anthony “The Wine Thug” Serignese**, general manager and partner in New York's **Stanton Social** and wine buyer for both Stanton and **Beauty and Essex** (which are owned by the same group). He carries 32 blends on his list, priced from \$48 to \$250 for the New World selections.

Operators noted that well known, benchmark styles of blends are often an easy sell. “The classic blends sell themselves to savvy wine drinkers,” said **Allison Foote**, certified sommelier and wine director at regional Italian restaurant **Rialto** in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She carries three blends by the glass, priced from \$12 to \$19.

“The U.S. consumer is becoming more aware of these wines and enjoys seeing them listed properly,” said **Tyler Packwood**, sommelier at **Trummer's on Main**, a one-location, creative American restaurant in Clifton, Virginia. He carries approximately 60 blends, priced from \$40 to \$400 by the bottle and none by the glass at the moment, although he noted that his list is constantly changing.

The Education Challenge

Many American consumers continue to express discomfort when they don't know the exact varietal makeup of a wine. As a result, operators often need to work a little harder to move blends that may be on par or better in quality than some of their single-varietal offerings. Serignese at Stanton said that selling blends can involve a little more effort as he “wants the average guest, who may be light on experience, to feel comfortable in finding something that may not look familiar to them.”

He went on to note the irony of the film *Sideways*, in which one of the main characters expresses distaste for Merlot and ends up drinking an iconic Bordeaux blend made principally from that grape. As a result of reactions like these, “It's our job to help interpret expectations of the masses, helping to guide them to what they might enjoy based on what experience they desire,” he said.

Rialto's Foote also commented that guest education and active hand-selling are still important for this category. “A successful sommelier should strive to hand-sell a blend specific to the guest's tastes and, when given the opportunity, broaden the guest's understanding of how terroir and region play a significant role in red blends.”

Another point of potential confusion is the fact that the range of red blends offered is constantly expanding with the growing number of New World wine options, often pushing the boundaries of traditionally structured and understood Old World blends. Serignese noted that he is seeing a strong revival of what he calls “kitchen sink blends,” containing just about every varietal; **Orin Swift's** “The Prisoner” from the Napa Valley is a good example of the genre, he said.

Pricing can also be a hurdle for some of these lesser known and potentially less understood wines. Serignese said that red blends, priced at more than \$80 a bottle, don't move very quickly. “The risk-to-reward ratio is just not there for the buyer yet.” The blend consumption skews almost exclusively to the bottle over by-the-glass, he added, which is a trend that other operators also confirmed.

Rialto's Foote noted that many consumers are still looking for value. “People are certainly looking at price-points and want the most impact for the dollars spent. We meet this need by offering value-driven, red blend options from emerging regions of Southern Italy and Sicily, as well as Southern France.”



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Potential Benefits

Many operators agree that blends have historically offered producers a chance to show their winemaking styles, vary the final product and adjust wines according to specific harvest conditions. These principles have long been part of the rationale why the Old World continues to support regional blending laws that they believe reflect terroir and offer flexibility for producers. Serignese noted that “a producer who is working with multiple varietals will surely have success with some fruit, even if parcels fail to meet their standards.”

Packwood at Trummer’s agreed that blends can offer a window into “displaying the craft of the winemaker.”

“There are so many values in this category that it has been growing in popularity for some time,” said **David Mokha**, director of beverage and sommelier for the approximately 1,500-room **Fontainebleau** in Miami Beach, which has 12 food and beverage outlets. He added that the red blend category is not a hard sell. He currently sells 15 red blends by the glass that range in price from \$12 to \$34.

Blends are also “a more complex art form at the highest level than making a straight varietal wine. It allows you to protect yourself in off-years by using a little more or less of certain items,” said **Tylor Field III**, vice president of wine and spirits at 77-location (worldwide) **Morton’s The Steakhouse**. His blends range in price from \$12 to \$20 by the glass and \$45 to \$275 and up by the bottle.

How to List the Wines and the Future Outlook

In that the bulk of American wine lists are either structured by country and region or varietal, how to list blends can often be a challenge. At Stanton, the Old World wines are listed by region. “The interesting part is how to list a New World blend in a way that entices a guest to try it,” said Serignese. By listing blends by their primary varietal, he feels he is helping his consumers explore whether they like Merlot- or Cabernet Sauvignon-based blends.

Notable names still drive sales more than the varietal makeup of wines, confirms Packwood. In addition, certain regions, such as France’s Châteauneuf-du-Pape, sell as well as other iconic wines, many of which are beyond the need for a blend breakdown.

Looking to the next step for these wines, Serignese confirmed that the American consumer is more open to new wine taste profiles than ever before “but mostly because we, as Americans, are still in the exploratory phases of developing a national wine culture.”

He suggested that producers of blends might benefit from “some ‘Smart-marketing.’” It’s a term he defines as “smart combined with marketing,” and it may well be good advice to many New World wine producers—even if they don’t produce blends—who are trying to sell their production in a competitive market.

In the next year, Packwood said the on-premise market should expect to see “a lot more unknown or less recognized varietals come into play.”

And the fact that the younger generation has a more adventuresome spirit also bodes well for red blends, added Morton’s Field. **WBM**



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