

Primer on Blending

Blending and Emerging Varietals

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Types of Blends

- Field blend: grapes are harvested on the same day, from the same vineyard, crushed and fermented together; classic CA heritage wines
- Co-ferment: grapes are harvested in the same time frame, crushed and fermented together
- Early blend: wines are combined right after fermentation ends
- Lates blends: wines are blended after aging, most common blend in CA
- Special purpose blends: these are co-ferments that have a very specific impact, like fixing color/tannin/aroma
 - Adding a little Viognier or Roussanne to Syrah
 - Adding a Malvasia grapes to Sangiovese in Chianti
 - Muscat grapes to Zinfandel (this results in a much darker and more tannic wine)

Recent History

- Blending is the norm in most of the traditional wine growing areas of the world
 - E.g. Bordeaux, Chianti, Rhone, Rioja, pre-80's California
- In the 80's, California blended wines came to be seen as 'compromised' in the US, largely because jug wines were blends
 - Hence the dominance of 'varietal' Cabernet Sauvignon, which is rare in France other than for export or tourists
- Since the end of the Robert Parker era, blends have become much more popular and acceptable
- Many varietally-labelled California wines are really undisclosed blends
 - Typical is the 75% C. Sauvignon plus some percentage of C. Franc and/or Merlot
 - Somewhat deceptive is the 75% Pinot/25% Syrah wines

Varietals and Their Contribution to Blends

Varietal	Contribution	Detriments
C. Sauvignon	Body, tannin, color, aromatics	High tannin, can be one-dimensional especially in warm climates, pyrazines
Merlot	Softness, aromatics	Can be light in color and one-dimensional in warm climates
C. Franc	Body, aromatics	Excessively aromatic in some cases
Malbec	Color, aromatics, juiciness	Often clashes in a blend
Zinfandel/Primitivo	Aromatics, fruitiness	Often high alcohol, thin body
Barbera*	Acid, color	Often very high acid and alcohol
Grenache*	Fruit, aromatics	Low color, light body, high alcohol
Syrah	Color, body, tannin	Can be heavy, often lacks complexity in warm climates

Varietals and Their Contribution to Blends

Varietal	Contribution	Detriments
Sangiovese	Acid, complexity, fruit	Low color and body, can be acidic and astringent
Mourvedre*	Body, color, tannin	Can be one-dimensional on its own, can lack aromatics
Nebbiolo	Tannin, aromatics	Often aggressively tannic and acidic
Tempranillo	Tannin, complexity	Often excessively tannic and lacking aromatics
Touriga	Color, body, fruitiness	Often very low acid, high tannins
Petite Sirah	Huge body, color, tannin	Often simple, excessive tannin
Carignan*	Color, acid, tannin	Lacks aroma and complexity, rough tannins
Cinsaut	Aromatics, juiciness, fruit	Very low in color, light body

White Blends

- We often associate blends with red wine but white blends are very common for the same reasons
- Classic blending whites:
 - Rhone: Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Picpoul, Viognier, Clairette
 - Bordeaux: Semillion, Sauvignon Blanc
 - Rioja: Viura (Macabeo), Grenache Blanc, Tempranillo Blanco
 - Vinho Verde: Albariño, Loureiro, Trajadura
 - Italy: Trebbiano, Malvasia, Verdicchio, Catarratto

Reasons for Blending

- Viticultural: hedging against bad weather, frost, etc.
 - Classic Bordeaux scenario
- Improving basic characteristics
 - Color, body or acid
- Improving complexity
 - E.g. Zinfandel, Carignan and Petite Sirah are often one-dimensional or simple on their own, hence classic CA blends
- Ameliorating wine faults
 - Obvious oak, low-levels of VA, weedy or herbal notes
- Diluting a characteristic that is overwhelming to where it is pleasant
 - Cabernet Franc is often extremely aromatic (cedar/pencil shavings) on its own but in small doses adds interesting and beneficial aromatic traits

Reasons not to Blend

- The wine is already complex, interesting and pleasant
- Desire to maintain or maximize varietal or site ("terroir") character
- Grape typically does not play well with others
 - Pinot noir (gets overwhelmed)
 - Vermentino (overwhelms)
- Wine style is historically not blended
 - Barolo (100% Nebbiolo)
 - Loire (100% Cabernet Franc)

(Though note both these grapes are very often parts of blends as well)

Strategy for Blending

- Always start with a goal in mind: what would the ideal outcome be for the final wine I have in mind?
 - Don't involve too many base wines, or it becomes impossible
 - Let tradition guide you, but don't be bound by it
- I usually begin with a single varietal base wine that is lacking something
 - Most often this is body, color or aromatics
 - Sometimes is one-dimensional
- Identify a wine that has the characteristic you want in the wine and test with a small amount (10-15%). I use a scale to measure this out
 - For example, Grenache is often very aromatic, but can be light in color and body, Syrah and Mourvedre can both help these traits

Strategy for Blending, cont.

- Blending two tannic, closed wines can often open those wines up
- Blending two very aromatic wines can lead to a dull flat or even unpleasant wine
 - Grenache plus Cinsaut seem to cancel each other out
- An acidic wine in a blend can make a huge difference, but it can also reduce body
 - Blending Barbera into Zinfandel can thin it out quite a bit.
- Sometimes a small amount of wine in a blend can have a huge impact and sometimes a lot of another wine can seem to do nothing at all
 - Recent GSM blend trial of 50% Grenache, 25% Syrah and 25% Mourvedre had identical aroma to 100% Grenache

Other Strategies for Blending

- Great blends often include combining grapes prone to oxidation with grapes prone to reduction
 - Merlot/C. Sauvignon, Grenache/Syrah, Grenache/Tempranillo
- Blending same varietal, different sites, improves complexity
 - Common in Cotes du Rhone area
- Blending base wine fermented with different commercial yeast strains, or fermented with cultured and wild yeasts can improve complexity, mouthfeel and aroma
 - E.g. CLOS (mouthfeel, tannin, body) plus SYR (floral aromatics) plus GRE (fruitiness)
- Some grapes are natural blenders that tend to improve everything
 - Mourvedre, Carignan, Tannat, Lagrein (not direct experience)

Example: Classic Italian-American Blends

- A whole culture of “box-car wines” developed in the early 20th century in the North East, especially among Italian immigrant communities
- Each family developed their own house style using classic California varietals
 - Zinfandel, P. Sirah, Alicante, Muscat, Barbera, Carignan, Cinsaut (“Black Malvoisie”), Mourvedre (“Mataro”)
- The blends were co-fermentations using a set number of “lugs” (36 lb boxes). For example:
 - Zin: 6 boxes (aroma, alcohol, fruit)
 - Carignan: 3 boxes (color, acid)
 - Barbera: 2 boxes (acid)
 - Petite Syrah: 2 boxes (color, tannin, body)
 - Muscat: 1 box (fixes color and tannin, aromatics)

Lesser Known and Emerging Varietals

Grape Varietals: Origin

- There are over 5000 grape varietals grown for wine in Europe
 - Over 1000 approved for wine in Italy alone
- In California, 85% of all quality wine comes from six grapes: Chardonnay, C. Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Sauvignon B. and Zinfandel
- With the exception of Zinfandel, all of these grapes come from the oceanic temperate zone in Northern France.
 - Four seasons, wet cold winters, warm humid summers with frequent rain
- California is largely Mediterranean climate
 - Two seasons, mild, wet winter, hot dry summer with little or no rain
- What does this mean?
 - Many of the most popular grapes evolved to have short growing seasons and cool summers, the Pinot family in particular (P. Noir, P. Gris, Chardonnay, etc.)

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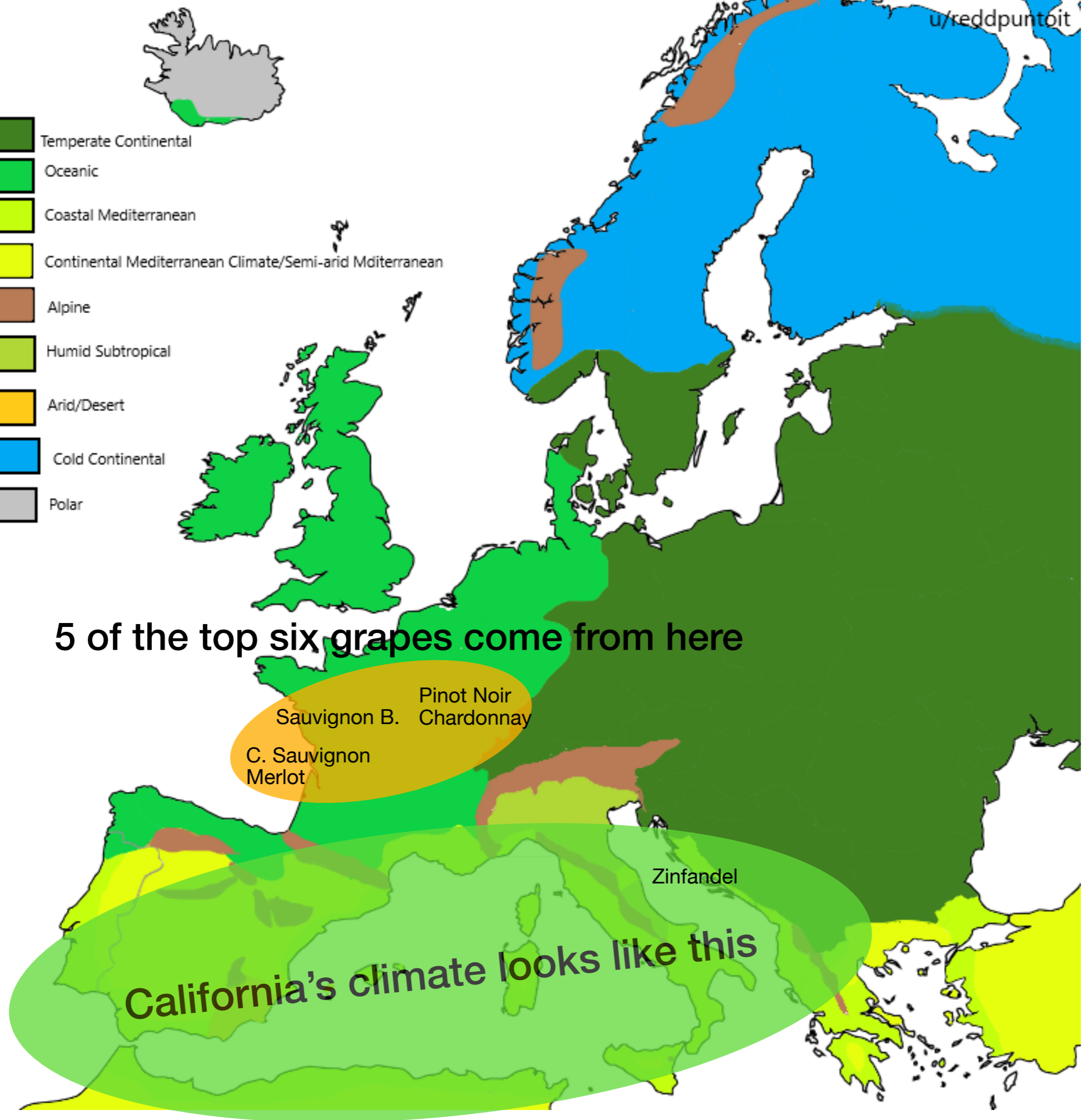
- Temperate Continental
- Oceanic
- Coastal Mediterranean
- Continental Mediterranean Climate/Semi-arid Mediterranean
- Alpine
- Humid Subtropical
- Arid/Desert
- Cold Continental
- Polar

5 of the top six grapes come from here

Pinot Noir
Chardonnay
Sauvignon B.
C. Sauvignon
Merlot

Zinfandel

California's climate looks like this





Pinot Noir / Blanc / Gris Descendants



CHILDREN



Savagnin



Gamay



Chardonnay



Melon



Aligoté



Pinotage



GRANDCHILDREN



Teroldego



Lagrein



Sauvignon B.




Chenin B.




Silvaner




GREAT GRANDCHILDREN



Colombard




Syrah




C. Sauvignon




Petit Manseng



Verdelho



Grüner Veltliner



Trousseau



Refosco

California is in a state of transition not seen since the 80's

Most Harvested Wine Grapes in California 2025

	1000 of tons	Percentage	Change since 2013
Chardonnay	538	18%	-30%
Cabernet Sauvignon	455	15%	-14%
<i>Columbard*</i>	265	9%	
Pinot Noir	218	7%	-27%
Zinfandel	202	7%	-57%
<i>Pinot Gris*</i>	191	6%	
<i>Rubired*</i>	151	5%	
Sauvignon Blanc	139	5%	27%
<i>Muscat of Alexandria*</i>	132	4%	
Merlot	130	4%	-70%
Total	2961	82%	

**Largely grown for jug wine in the Central Valley*

Trends: white grapes increasing; big reds and Chardonnay decreasing
That said, California is still dominated by cold climate grapes from N. France

Cool climate grapes in a hot, dry climate has an impact on winemaking

- Very soft tannins, low acid, “jammyness”.
- Adding acid and watering back musts, oak as a ‘flavor’ rather than as a way of reducing tannins and acid
- Napa Cab went from 22 brix average harvest in 1980 to 27 brix today
- This is a stylistic choice, but alcohol removal via reverse osmosis is now part of the ‘terroir’ of Napa
 - This is not an option for home winemakers or small commercial wineries even

Emerging Varietals: why should you care?

- Many of these grapes are fascinating and make amazing wine
 - Deals with the fact that places like Safeway have very limited selection
- They often make better wine in California than in their home in Europe, or just taste differently in an interesting way.
- Grapes that fit well in their climate make better wines, in addition to being easier to grow
- They develop full flavor, and require less ‘winemaking’. They are thus better able to express both the locale (“Terroir”) and varietal character
- California is going through a period of intense experimentation with varietals
 - In California people often just order a generic glass of wine (Cab, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc)
 - Huge loss of market in the East coast and abroad -tastes are changing and experiencing a wide range of varietals is a big part of the experience

Which red grapes increased harvest?

2023 to 2024

Red Harvest dropped 25% from 2 million to 1.5 million

Which grapes increased tonnage?

Graciano

Primitivo

C. Sauvignon (-30%)

Refosco

Souzão

Arinarnoa

Tinta Madeira

Aleatico

Carmenère

Freisa

Marselan

Meurnier

Which white grapes increased harvest?

2023 to 2024

White Harvest dropped 18% from 1.7 million to 1.4 million

Arneis

Chardonnay -20% (2024)

Assyrtiko

Chardonnay -16% (2022)

Chenin (+17%)

Cortese

Falanghina

Marsanne (x3)

Picpoul

Sylvaner

Verdelho

Emerging White Varietals

Tend to come from European wine regions that mirror the climate of California

- Vermentino (Italy): much fruitier and expressive than in Italy, full bodied
- Picpoul (France): same, lighter body but more tropical fruit
- Grenache Blanc (Spain): rich, dense, forms the base for an amazing blend
- Falanghina (Italy): nice acid, great with food, versatile, aromatic
- Treixadura (Spain/Portugal): rare, but showing huge promise, rich and full-bodied with Sauvignon Blanc aromatics
- Albariño (Spain/Portugal): nice acid, floral, lighter body
- Petit Manseng (France, big on the East Coast): rich, high acid, honey aromatics, full body and color. This is going to be popular
- Fiano (Italy): a big, age-worthy white that really shows bottle bouquet

Emerging Red Varietals

Tend to come from European wine regions that mirror the climate of California

- Grenache Noir (Spain): super aromatic and terroir-driven, the “Pinot of the Foothills”, seems to express more than any grape in the Foothills
- Touriga Nacional (Portugal): super full body, lower alcohol, great fruit and tannin
- Mourvedre (Spain): needs a long, warm growing season to ripen and loves the foothills, great as part of a blend
- Aglianico: (Italy) high acid and tannin, floral, the “Nebbiolo of the south”
- Refosco: (Italy): thick skins, dark and tannic but with good acid, strawberry aromatics
- Schioppettino: like a super-Barbera, high acid, aromatic, dark color and very little tannin, blends well with Refosco

Emerging Red Varietals, cont.

Tend to come from European wine regions that mirror the climate of California

- Tannat (France): mountain grape, high tannin, color, acid and body, needs long growing season
- Cabernet Franc (France): originated in S. France and tolerates heats well, but likes higher elevation
- Nero d'Avola (Sicily): standout flavor, rich, expressive, higher acid, lower pH, sold out faster than almost any red
- Graciano (Spain): super rich and dense, fruity with great acid and tannin, will definitely tell be a hit in California
- Montepulciano: deep color, acid, fruit, tannin, very long growing season needed, ideal for much of California, 2nd most planted red in Italy.

Some grapes just seem to struggle in California

- Grapes that need high humidity to perform
 - Riesling, Sangiovese, Nebbiolo
- Grapes that have very short growing seasons
 - Gewurtraminer, Chardonnay, Pinot family, Syrah (in many cases, it still produces a dark wine with lots of “stuff”, but it really only thrives in cool spots (e.g. Bien Nacido vineyard))
- These are generalizations, there are always exceptions
 - We made Nebbiolo in 2024 from a vineyard in Lone and I really like it (though it’s going to need a lot of time)
 - There are likely a lot of spots planted to Cabernet and Chardonnay that would produce (much better) Sangiovese
 - Excellent Riesling in San Luis Obispo

Conclusion

Explore and you will be rewarded

- Two things you will find very little of in the supermarket
 - Blended wines
 - Non-common varietals
- They are missing out! California is only beginning its wine journey and the best is coming
- The next twenty years are going to be focused on a second era of discovery in California wine
 - Blending will lose its stigma
 - Grapes that fit the climate are going to become more and more common
- Case in point: Touriga Nacional was recently added to the approved list of grape varietals for Bordeaux

Tasting

- Three wines, these are both emerging/rare varietals and a blend:
 - 2023 Touriga: 100% Touriga (Nacional) from Skaer Ridge Vineyard in El Dorado County
 - 2023 Aglianico: 100% Aglianico from Carpe Diem Vineyard in El Dorado County
 - 2023 Conspiracy: 60% Aglianico and 40% Touriga
- Some things to think about
 - What are the main characteristics of each of the components and what do they have to offer to a blend?
 - How different is the blend from its component parts?
 - Does the blend taste more 'mature' than the components?
 - What else do you think would blend well with these grapes?