



OTHER RED

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



They are some of my favorite wines and they fall into one of my favorite categories. They are not Cabernet Sauvignon, not Merlot, not Pinot Noir or Syrah or Zinfandel. Nor, even, are they Petite Sirah or

GSM (Grenache-Syrah-Mourvedre) Rhone-style blends. What are they? They are "Other Red." Other Red is "everything else"; it is everything that doesn't, for whatever reason, fit into another category. The wines could be from a single if obscure variety (say Blaufrankish, Lemberger, or Refosco) but they are most likely made from a variety of different grapes – including ALL of those listed above – often in non-traditional or even unlikely blends. I suppose Other Reds could come from anywhere in the world but here we are concerned with the American Other Reds category.

American Other Red might be a blend of Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon (Cabfandel?) or it might be a "Rhone-fandel" (a blend of Zinfandel with some or all of the GSM Rhone varieties). It might be a single vineyard semi-field blend like Ridge Geyserville or it might be someone's idea of a good everyday drinking red (like Shannon Ridge "Wrangler Red"). Any US red made from Portuguese varieties is Other Red. Before it had a name, Meritage – blends made of the Bordeaux varieties (Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, and Petit Verdot) – started off as Other Red but with a name and an organization and something of a fan club, Meritage (rhymes with "heritage") is now its own category. But take a classic Cabernet-dominant Meritage blend and add Syrah to the mix and the resulting wine is no longer Meritage – so it is back to Other Red. One of my favorite Other Reds is a Paso Robles blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Syrah, and Petite Sirah. It doesn't fit into any other category but it is delicious and satisfying. So how do you find these wines? Go shop the Other Reds.

Here is what you'll find:

Reds With a Regional Identity

Some of my favorite Other Reds are the wines that truly express the character of a region. These are blends, but the mix of grapes does not hark back to a European wine making region. Rather, it is a mix of grapes that works in an American wine making region. Maybe this mix has a name and a defining set of rules or maybe it is something that is organically coming together (even if not organically grown) as a regional style develops. Two examples come readily to mind: Coro Mendocino (an organization) and Paso Robles (a region).

Coro Mendocino was started by a group of growers in Mendocino who recognized Zinfandel as a base for a great blend that could be a flagship for their area. Their starting point was a foundation of not less than 40% and not more than 70% Zinfandel to which they could blend Syrah, Petite Sirah, Carignane, Sangiovese, Grenache, Dolcetto, Charbono, Barbera, and/or Primitivo. None of the other varieties in the blend could exceed the percentage of Zinfandel. Also, up to 10% of the blend could be "wild card" varieties of the

winemaker's choice. The result could be pretty close to Ridge Geyserville in both blend and style. But of course Ridge Geyserville is marketed as "Zin" and is from northern Sonoma which is just a bit south of Mendocino. Despite the fact that their website is down (is there no more obvious modern death-rattle?), Coro Mendocino was and remains a neat idea but it seems to have never gained real "traction" in the market. Of course these wines are all "Other Reds."

Paso Robles is the home of a lot of ambitious winemaking right alongside some fairly dismal winemaking. Sometimes both are found in the same place. Nevertheless, the ambitious winemakers have boldly blended the Rhone varieties with both Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon (but usually not together) and at the same time have brought in Zinfandel's partner Petite Sirah and Cabernet's Bordeaux buddy Petit Verdot (along with the odd other) for some unorthodox blending. Cabernet Sauvignon blended with Syrah harks back to a lot of the better wines of Australia. Reportedly, the original vintage of Grange was mostly Syrah (Shiraz) blended with some Petit Verdot and an bit of Cabernet. A lot of the Paso winemakers are blending these sorts of wines into flagship reds that give a face and a style to a too-big, climatically-diverse region. Look for wines from L'Aventure, Vina Robles, Proulx, and Calcerous (coming soon).

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What Is NOT "Other Red"

Other Red can be defined by what it is not. It is not a wine labeled with a main stream varietal. If the label says Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Cabernet Franc, or Malbec, the wine is not Other Red. Even though there aren't many made in the US, Sangiovese is not Other Red. Neither is Barbera but maybe they should be. (US Tempranillo is Other Red and so are Tannat, Nebbiolo, Bonardo, and Dolcetto). As noted, Meritage is not Other Red but blend in 5-or-10% something other than the five red Bordeaux varieties (yes, I know that Carmenera is a Bordeaux variety too but there is a reason they quit planting it there.) and you have Other Red.

GSM and the whole Rhone spectrum are not Other Red ... but, like Meritage, they once were. What happened? The Wine Spectator put Randall Graham on its cover in a Lone Ranger outfit and the Rhone Ranger movement came of age. Suddenly, whether as varietal wines or in blends, Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvedre (which at that time was better known in California as Mataro) as well as Counoise, Cinsault, and Carignan had their own play-pen. And Petite Sirah, although never part of the old-world Rhone cocktail, was at least an honorary member while retaining a sort of dual citizenship with its own section (and fan club – "P.S., I love you") and a not-so-secret dalliance with Zinfandel.

Are ZinBlends Other Red? Despite not meeting the legal requirements to be called Zinfandel on the label, Ridge Geyserville (currently 74% Zinfandel, 17% Carignan, 6% Petite Sirah, 2% Alicante Bouschet, and 1% Mataro) is, in popular parlance, Zinfandel and so is not Other Red. (In fact, Geyserville is one of the wines that defines the top end of the Zinfandel quality range.) Bogle Phantom, currently a blend of 49% Petite Sirah, 49% Zinfandel and 2% Mourvedre, is an Other Red (the percentage of Mourvedre has been much higher in the past).

Maybe someday "Cabfandel", "Rhone-fandel", and the Paso blends will NOT be Other Red but for now, these flavorful favorites fall into this favored category.

The Kitchen Sink Blends

The Kitchen Sink blends are just that: blends that seemingly include everything but the kitchen sink. Usually, these wines seem to be the product of a winery trying to make a bit by marketing its leftovers. Some of these are awful and some, usually but not always from wineries that only grow grapes that at least sort of go together in the first place, are actually pretty good. I taste and reject the bad stuff before we buy any so the Kitchen Sink blend that Spec's sells are, at least in my opinion, pretty good. These sort of blends can come from anywhere (or even lots of anywheres) in California. The best resolve into "Spaghetti Reds" or "Burger Reds" that have a rustic but everyday appeal and usually an everyday price as well. They are fun to try, usually easy to drink, and rarely (at least in the case of the ones we actually buy) offensive.

The One-Offs

So what do you call it when you blend Syrah to a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petit Verdot? I don't know either. If you are Steve Reynolds and the blend is 57% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Merlot, and the rest is a mix of Syrah, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot, you name the wine "Persistence." If you are Doug Shafer and the blend is 84% Syrah and 15% Petite Sirah, you name it "Relentless." In either case, the wine is Other Red. As are any "California Super Tuscans" (Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon) or California "Super Riojans" (Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon).

The Rhone-fandels

Zinfandel with Grenache, Syrah, and/or Mourvedre. There is precedent in the mixed black vineyards and field blends of northern Sonoma and Mendocino for these sorts of "Rhone-fandel" blends but they are likely to be dominated by Zinfandel and contain other varieties such as Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet, Barbera, and Charbono. In the literal hot bed that is Paso Robles, Zinfandel and the GSMs plays on the main stage and sometimes the G, the S, or the M can take the star turn. Look at Linne Calado. (Ok, they are pricey and there is not much available but they are GREAT wines.) There are others. Seek them out. On a more available level, look at Proulx. I know, you've never heard of Proulx but it is much more available and quite affordable – and it sings the same tunes as some of the Linne Calado wines. Trust me, OK?

Cabfandel?

Can one wine make a trend? If the winery behind it is Duckhorn and the wine is marketed very well and has just a bit of luck (it goes almost without saying that it tastes great), the answer is yes. That trend is Zinfandel and Cabernet together in one bottle and the one wine is Paraduxx. The first wine (made in the 1994 vintage) blended Zinfandel with Cabernet, Merlot, and Petite Sirah. The current 2008 vintage is a blend of 68% Zinfandel, 24% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Merlot, and 1% Cabernet Franc. While Paraduxx (paradox and "pair of ducks" – get it?), started the category as a category (there were other such blends before), it is not - like the Highlander - the "only one." I am particularly fond of Storybook Mountain Antaeus (Antaeus, the son of Water and Earth in Greek mythology, is the symbol of strength derived from the soil), currently (the 2007 vintage) is a blend of 50% Zinfandel, 36% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Petit Verdot and 10% Merlot. These wines work with some of the more exuberant foods coming out of American kitchens these days.

Other Red? It may not sound like much but you could do a lot of excellent drinking without shopping outside the Other Red category.