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## What is "nobility" in wine?

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Posted by *steve* on Aug 9, 2013 in *Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Sauv Blanc, Sparkling wine, Syrah* | 2 comments



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Why are Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay "noble" varieties? Why isn't Zinfandel? Can Syrah be "noble"? Is sparkling wine "noble"?

First, we have to define "noble." It's an oldish word when applied to wine. From Wikipedia: "Noble grapes are any grapes traditionally associated with the highest quality wines. This concept is not as common today, partly because of the proliferation of hybrid grape varieties, and partly because some critics feel that it unfairly prioritizes varieties grown within France. Historically speaking, the noble grapes comprised only six varieties: Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot."

It's tempting for me to side with the democrats [small "d"] in this argument—the ones who feel that de-nobelizeing certain varieties because they're not French is unfair and patronizing. But there are sound reasons for preserving our current understanding of varietal nobility.

The most important of these reasons is that, in California as in France, a handful of varieties clearly makes the best wines, and has for pretty much as long as the state's wine industry has existed. All I need do is go to Wine Enthusiast's database to confirm this. Since the first of this year, all 30 of my highest-scoring wines have been either Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay, with the single exception of a Nickel & Nickel 2010 Merlot, from the Harris Vineyard, in Oakville. (And I, personally, would not include Merlot among the nobles, at least in California.)

Why do these wines score higher than other varieties? Ahh, here we get into the fuzzy details, which are impossible of proof. But let me try. First and foremost, there is structure, a word that seems comprehensible at first. Structure is architecture: just as you can have the most beautiful stuff (paintings, carpets, furniture, vases) in the world, but it's only a mere pile if it doesn't have a room or home in which to reside, so too wine needs walls, a floor, a ceiling, a sense of stolidity and solidity, else it become simple flavor. And flavor, in and of itself, has never been the primary attribute of great wine.

California, of course, has no problem developing flavor, in any variety. That's due to our climate: grapes ripen dependably. To the extent California wines are the target of criticism, it is because Europhiles find a dreary sameness to too many of them. Even I, as staunch a defender of California wine as there is, find this to be true. Too often, the flavors of red wines suggest blackberries and cherries and chocolate, whether it's Syrah, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Grenache, Cabernet, Merlot, Tempranillo. It's easy for such wines to score 87 points, or 89 points, or even 91 points: these are good scores, but not great ones, limited by the wines' lack of structure.

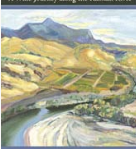
Structure, of course, is composed primarily of acidity and tannins, the latter of which may come from both the grapes and the oak treatment. (I won't get into the mysteries of minerality.) Yet there are elements of structure that are more difficult to define. Texture is an element of structure, just as the way a room feels is an element of its architecture. Imagine a room with soaring roof and large windows that let in the sunlight, as opposed to a cramped, pinched room, a closet or storage area. The former feels more satisfactory to our senses and esthetics. So too does a wine with great texture feel superior. It can be the hardest thing in the world to put into words, but even amateurs will appreciate the difference between a beautifully-structured wine and its opposite. (I have proven this many times, with my wine-drinking friends who have but limited understanding of it.)

So why don't we allow Zinfandel into the ranks of noble wines? I suppose an argument could be made that we should, for at its highest expressions—Williams Selyem, De Loach, Elyse, Ravenswood, Bella, Turley—Zinfandel does fulfill the structural and textural prerequisites of a noble wine. But too often, it does not: a Zinfandel can be classic Zin for its style (Dry Creek Valley, Amador County) and yet be a little rustic, in a shabby-chic way. Sometimes this is due to excessive alcohol, sometimes to overripened fruit, but no matter the cause, and no matter how much fun that Zin is to drink with barbecue, the last thing I'd call most Zins is noble. Zinfandel is Conan the Barbarian, ready to chop your head off and stick it on the tip of a spear.

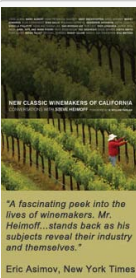


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- Can sparkling wine be said to be noble? It is most often, of course, a blend of two noble varieties, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, so why not? The answer is as simple as this: We call varieties "noble," not wine types. Perhaps we should expand the definition of "noble" to include types, not just sparkling blends but Sherry and Port. Certainly these are great wines, if underappreciated nowadays. I keep my eye, also, on some of the surprisingly eccentric red blends being produced lately, mainly by younger winemakers (often in Paso Robles), who are mixing varieties in unprecedented and triumphant ways, proving that a wine doesn't have to be varietal (as defined by the TTB) in order to be great.
- But I'm comfortable for the time being restricting nobility to just a handful of varieties in California: Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Not Riesling, not yet, in our state. Not Sauvignon Blanc, not yet, in our state. Not Syrah, not yet, in our state. And not, as I have said, Merlot. Any one of these latter varieties can produce great wine, but it will be the exception.

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## 2 Responses to "What is "nobility" in wine?"



*Mary Ewing-Mulligan says:*  
August 9, 2013 at 9:29 am

A very effective description of structure and its role in a great wine. Nicely done.



*Steve says:*  
August 9, 2013 at 10:48 am

Thank you Ms. Ewing-Mulligan! Always a privilege to have an M.W. here on my blog.

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