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Blending In with Raymond Vineyards and Abacus

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by Andrew Chalk

It was a packed house at [Abacus](#) in Uptown Dallas this week as Chef Kent Rathbun welcomed [Raymond Vineyards](#) Chief Blending Officer Tyson Madden for two important responsibilities. First, Kent Rathbun Concepts' (Abacus' parent company) own Director of Operations, Matthew Scott (who oversees wine operations as part of a broader mandate) was one of eight sommeliers selected by Raymond to blend a special wine, the 2012 Sommelier Selection Cabernet Sauvignon, for sale in a limited number of restaurant locations and to the winery's mailing list. Madden explained how the sommeliers took base wines from Napa, Sonoma and Lake Counties in California's North Coast and experimented until they came up with a Sommelier's Blend that was 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Merlot and a nominal 5% Petit Verdot. We tasted their work and they made an elegant, easy-drinking wine with an unmistakable backbone of Cabernet.

Our job, as blender-attendees, was to taste it and aspire to make a wine as balanced and refined. Tyson Madden produced our base wines (a different selection from the ones that the professional sommeliers had used): a Napa Cabernet blend made in neutral oak, a Napa Cabernet blend made in new French oak, a Napa Merlot and a Napa Cabernet Franc. We got to work in pairs, tasting and blending the base wines in graduated cylinders using pipettes for millilitre accuracy. It was a new experience for me, having done all my previous blending in my stomach. I and my partner-in-wine (a Glazer's VP, no less) were honored to have our cuvée, sensitively named "The Fudge", go forward to represent our table at the final judging where each table's winning wine would be pitted against the others.



Tasting our pathbreaking (sic) blends

The steel-jawed, inscrutable judges (Kent Rathbun, Matthew Scott, and Tyson Madden) sniffed and slurped their way through the eight final submissions. Alas, our baby was not chosen and thus ended up as yet another experiment to be confined to the blending room floor of history. We contemplated suicide, but decided another glass of wine was a better idea. Blame for this humiliation should probably fall on me, as I had the brainwave of not using any of the aged-oak base wine. Figuring that the judges palates would be like the rest of western civilization and go gaga over new French oak, we went with over 50% of that, adding enough Merlot to impart mocha notes and Cabernet Franc for its characteristic 'greenness', which we thought would make the judges ovulate with anticipation before reaching a final climactic ejaculation of joy at the profundity of what we had created.

They didn't. And I guess I am a shit blender. I have resolved to remain an apex predator (to borrow a scuba analogy) in the wine business and just be a consumer.

Somebody who does know how to blend is Raymond Vineyards, which provided top-tier wines for us to work with and sip for inspiration. Those wines also paired well with the heavy hors d'oeuvres from the Abacus kitchen (a shout out to whoever on the brigade made the lamb chops). Look for Raymond red wines to pair with steak, lamb, game and prime rib. It was an instructive and enjoyable evening for all. Watch out for more innovative events like this (sign up for the Abacus mailing list to hear about them).

I attended this event as a media guest.

Top photo: L to R: Matthew Scott, (Kent Rathbun Concepts), Carla Nichols (Boisset, Raymond parent) and Tyson Madden (Raymond master blender), at the Raymond blending event at Abacus.