

SFGATE

This could be Napa's weirdest wine experience

By Sarah Miller

Friday, October 23, 2015



Photo: Sarah Rice, Special To The Chronicle

Reporting for Raymond Vineyards' Winemaker for a Day class are a Canadian couple, Jill and Martin, and I. We begin in the tasting room. In Napa tradition, it looks like an expensively remodeled kitchen. They give us a splash of Cabernet Sauvignon and, at my request, one of rosé.

We are presently greeted by **Joe Fontes**, our host and instructor, who is so neatly dressed and clean cut he looks like a missionary, but with this Rumspringa-esque side gig.

Joe leads us through a deluxe tasting room named the Crystal Cellar. Its exclusivity is signified by enormous chandeliers (Raymond owner **Jean-Charles Boisset** loves chandeliers, Joe says) and decorative mannequins in glittering "Eyes Wide Shut" evening clothes. We move deeper into the Raymond fortress. Enormous stainless steel tanks hover over us.

We enter our classroom, which is clearly the result of a nightclub and a science lab drinking a lot of wine and successfully mating. The lights are low and intimate, but somehow, science appropriate. Each student's place holds several empty wineglasses, four small bottles of labeled wine, a glass of water and measuring equipment. The pulsing music is motivating and inspiring, but also makes me feel as if I'm trying to pick someone up at Badlands.

Joe distributes our outfits. Raymond has clearly run studies and determined that 2 ounces is the amount of wine the average adult must consume to willingly put on a glittery disco tam-o'-shanter and matching silver robe.

"Does anyone else feel like **Hugh Hefner**?" Martin asks.



Yes, Martin. Everyone.

The bottles contain 2013 vintages of Cabernet Sauvignon aged in neutral oak, Cabernet Sauvignon aged in new oak, Merlot and Petit Verdot. Our goal is to combine at least two to create our own custom blend. So we're not so much winemakers for a day as wine blenders for a few hours. This is fine with me. I am having a wonderful time — it's sort of like kindergarten with wine instead of Play-Doh, i.e., my dream.

Joe is ambitious, attractive, personable and, most importantly, laughs at all my jokes. He directs us to taste all the wine, in the order above, and share our opinions. The neutral oak Cabernet has berry flavors, I say. Jill says it is dry. Martin agrees. Ditto for the new oak Cabernet except it also smells like vanilla and of — naturally — new oak. I am generally wary of super-oaked wine, but it is Martin's favorite. Jill likes the neutral oak Cabernet or the Merlot best. In lieu of having an opinion, and with a nod toward feminism, I agree with Jill about everything.

Joe offers some basic facts about the wines, but he keeps it general, so as not to color our opinions. Like imagine if Joe said, “You can do what you want but IMHO only total idiots like Petit Verdot.” That would be bad.

The slightly simplified takeaway, and what is relevant to our blending task, is that the Cab Sauvs (do I sound like a winemaker!) are generally (but not always) the backbone of a blend, and Merlot is used to mellow it out and Petit Verdot adds spice, kick, verve. To be completely honest (and this is a little embarrassing, considering that I study and write about wine), I can’t really tell the difference between the four wines. I have Joe run a short blind tasting test for me, and sure enough, I misidentify every single wine. Joe tells me not



to be discouraged, and I assure him that two drinks in at 11:30 in the morning is an unlikely point to find me feeling discouraged. Also, I decide if there are comment cards and they say “Joe made me feel safe about my blending choices,” I will check “Strongly Agree.”

Joe shows us how to use our “scientific equipment” to be ultra precise in our measuring, and we are off to the races. I have a Blending Plan: a large amount of neutral oak Cabernet, a significant amount of Merlot and just a little Petit Verdot. I have seen blends of similar proportions before, but I don’t want to reinvent the wheel here. I try 60-25-15, but it has a slight cough-medicine taste, and I think my culprit is the Petit Verdot. I try 70-20-10, but it’s still got that medicine flavor, and I sense (simultaneously sensing that maybe I sense nothing) that I need to keep the grounding influence of the Merlot stronger, while lowering the Petit Verdot even more. So for my third try, I go 60-35-5, and pronounce it perfect.

I was kind of hoping that we’d sit around and try our blends and discuss them, like people might on a French television program, but instead we are hustled into a room where we bottle our wine. I have to admit the machine that blends your wine is pretty cool. You just dial in a percentage of your varietal and it comes right out of the spigot — like “The Jetsons,” but for winos. And we use a nifty little lever thing to cork it and a nifty foil-wrapping machine to foil it and smooth on a dignified Raymond Winemaker for a Day label. We hold our bottles proudly, as if we had just birthed them.

The blending class is rounded out by a tour of more of the Raymond facility, an experience clearly designed to remove all doubt concerning Boisset’s affection for chandeliers.

Boisset doesn’t just love chandeliers, though, he also loves wine education, and I myself take quite a liking to a feature called the Corridor of the Senses, with fabric samples like silk, satin and velvet that help you describe the texture of wine, and little bottles with squeezable pumps that waft out wine aromas: cherry, oak, smoke and more. It would have been helpful to check this out before class, but then again, it probably wouldn’t have been much more effective than cramming for a test. Besides, my wine turned out just fine. In true NorCal fashion, I shared it with my yoga teacher in exchange for tips on my Warrior Two.

“This is amazing,” she said, and when I told her I blended it myself, and the reasoning behind my choices, I allowed myself to enjoy her being impressed.