

At lunchtime, Jean-Charles Boisset shares his passion for biodynamic farming at the sommeliers' roundtable.

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of the

MINDS

SOMMS AND BEVERAGE DIRECTORS
 SIT DOWN TO CRAFT THE NEXT
**RAYMOND VINEYARDS SOMMELIER
 SELECTION CABERNET SAUVIGNON**

BY MARGUERITE RICHARDS

photos by John Curley



Talk about mood. A disco ball here and a crystal chandelier there, Lady Gaga on the radio, red velvet furniture between glints of glitter and stainless steel . . . For me, Raymond Vineyards was *Barbarella* come to life. I kept expecting Jane Fonda to slide out of a giant stainless steel wine tank in one of her lusty leather outfits. Instead, it was a group of eight somms donning silver space cadet lab coats fiddling with graduated cylinders and beakers. The whimsical getup and atmosphere of the wine lab was a reminder that while quality wine is serious business, you don't need to miss out on the fun in the making. Today's mission: to create the 2012 Raymond Vineyard Sommelier Selection Cabernet Sauvignon blend.



Sommelier/consultant Christopher Sawyer rounding out his team's blend before the blind tasting.

{ in the cellar }



A meeting of West and East Coast minds. Nicholas Rimedio, Director of Food & Beverage at L'Ermitage Beverly Hills, with Kevin C. Reynolds, Executive Wine Director at Pittsburgh's Duquesne Club.

The Event

Every year, Raymond Vineyards brings together a group of influential sommeliers and beverage directors from all over the country to spend a morning crafting a blend pleasing to their own palates, something worthy of their names. Four teams of two submit one blend each to a blind tasting, and the winning blend is chosen by the same group to become the next Sommelier Selection. Everybody wins: Somms get to rub shoulders with their equals and learn intricate brand characteristics, while Raymond finishes with an excellent blend backed by well-trained consumer-facing professionals. The blending session is bookended by meals that give everyone an opportunity to warm up to one another. This round table is also an opportunity for the winemaker to take the industry temperature at a national level, fielding expert opinions on the placement of the brand's wines.

The Rules

"We won't direct you, but we will give you constraints. You can ask questions. The team that usually wins is the one that asks the most," explains Stephanie Putnam, Raymond Vineyards Director of Winemaking. She encourages teamwork as everyone sits down to begin the blending process, and her open nature incites winemakers to drop their egos, reminding participants that many people can be "super sensitive to one characteristic, so it's good to bounce back ideas with a partner. Don't agonize over the first blend," she says: "it won't be perfect."

Participants have five different wines before them from which to construct the final cuvée: Sonoma, Lake and Napa Cabernets, and Napa Petit Verdot and Merlot. She reminds them that in order to call it a Cab, they will need a minimum of 75% this varietal in the blend. "Keep in mind we're working with very young wines, and the goal is to make an approachable by-the-glass offering for restaurants, at \$12 to \$15 per glass." Somms and beverage directors perk up at that instruction; these field experts know what that tastes like.

The Game

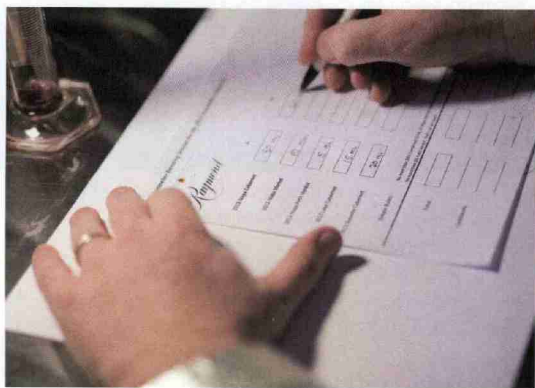
The slip-slide of stemware on the metal lab table and clink-clank of glass on glass sounds like toast after toast as the experts focus on the blending experience. They go about pouring and adding gulps and drops of cabernet or Merlot and Petit Verdot with a pipette. "We are going to make a masterpiece here," says Christopher Sawyer, Sommelier at Sonoma Renaissance Resort

PARTICIPATING SOMMS

Matthew Christoff, Wine Director, Moderne Barn Restaurant, Armonk, NY
Hamid Elofir, F&B Director, Sandpoint Country Club, Seattle, WA
Marc Irving, Head Sommelier, Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn, Sonoma, CA
Saddiq Mir, Food & Beverage Operations, Hilton Anatole, Dallas, TX
Kevin C. Reynolds, Executive Wine Director, Duquesne Club, Pittsburgh, PA
Nicholas Rimedio, Director of Food & Beverage, L'Ermitage, Beverly Hills
Christopher Sawyer, consulting sommelier, Sonoma, CA
Matthew R. Scott, Director of Operations, Kent Rathbun Concepts, Dallas, TX



Saddiq Mir, responsible for all food and beverage outlets and banquet operations at Hilton Anatole, diligently notes tested quantities as his collaborator, Matthew R. Scott, Director of Operations for Kent Rathbun Concepts, gently releases a few extra drops of Napa Petit Verdot to add texture to the blend.



Precision blending is required to find the winning Cabernet blend of five Raymond wines: Sonoma, Lake and Napa Cabernets, as well as Napa Petit Verdot and Merlot.

THE MASTER

Jean-Charles Boisset is French born and well aware that he's not at home. He desires to combat any stand-offish reputation so common to the French. To make Raymond feel accessible, Jean-Charles has made the winery dog friendly to visitors, with a spot to welcome all four-legged companions—an actual winery, named after his own French bulldog, Frenchie. He also built what he calls a “corridor of the senses,” a sensory wall where visitors can gain a tactile understanding of the kind of vocabulary people use when tasting wine, from furry, to bubbly, to gritty and beyond. Jean-Charles is playful, and enjoys his work to the hilt. While the wines speak for themselves, he doesn't take himself too seriously. And that's refreshing. One look at his promotional video where he plays 007, and you get the picture. It's no wonder he managed to win over Gina Gallo—the two were married in 2009.

and Spa's The Lodge. “I feel like a mad scientist, and I like it.”

At first the sommeliers are quiet, yet as they begin to loosen up, they begin working with one another more openly. Somms' comments and questions range from uncertainty about how to deal with a chalky finish to a mini debacle about how to fill that lack of “middle.” One participant finds that the Lake County Cab brings fruit and structure, and his counterpart notes that the Petit Verdot adds texture. A sense of fun, friendly competition fills the room. It's all in good fun: After all, the winning wine will boast everyone's names, so they rely on the entire group to come up with greatness.

Leaning in to spy as they are diligently working, I ask Nicholas Rimedio, Director of Food & Beverage at L'Ermitage Beverly Hills, what they've come up with so far. He hesitates a moment but coyly gives in. “Since we are going to win . . .” he chuckles, “we chose the Lake and Sonoma fruit for center stage and the Napa Merlot for finesse.”

Matthew R. Scott, Director of Operations for Texas-based Kent Rathbun Concepts, tells us their challenge is to balance the fruit. With his co-conspirator, Saddiq Mir, responsible for all food and beverage outlets and banquet operations at Hilton Anatole in Dallas, they talk a lot about climate and its influence. “We removed the Lake County Cab because it comes from a windy, colder climate.” Saddiq chimes in about how “\$12 to \$14 is an average person's comfort zone price for a glass of wine, no matter where they come from.” Together they are working on finding that soft spot, aiming to create something that they hope people will talk about.

At the end of two hours, the group takes a break with some tasty palate pleasers (and cleansers) brought in by jovial chef Michel Cornu, Director of Cuisine and Hospitality for Boisset Collection. The blind tasting follows and the winning blend—created by Chris Sawyer and Marc Irving—is presented at the end of the lunch. It ultimately consists of 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Merlot, 5% Petit Verdot. **SJ**