

Red Blends

What once was the least pricey “fine” wine in California, the former red Burgundy of old (1970s), today has come full circle.

And at ludicrously high prices for wines that typically aren’t worth a fraction of what we’re being asked to pay.

Over the last five years or so, the amorphous, usually overripe red blends we’ve seen are filling wine store shelves and seem to have captured the fancy of many consumers.

How did these wines develop? A cynic (who? me?) could easily tell you it has to do with the fact that Syrah is not selling well for the amount of money wineries originally thought they could get. Varietal Syrah is not a hot item, these days. Nor is Merlot (thank you, Sideways). And those who have Malbec can’t compete with lower- priced Argentine imports.

Yet these grapes are still planted and giving wineries fruit they can’t use as a varietal.

So what do wineries do when they have lots of Syrah, Malbec and Merlot?

They create blends. Are the grape varieties compatible? If you don’t mind boring, dark-red wines that are clumsy and not well designed to go with food, then they make passable wine. But at \$20 to \$25 a bottle? A lot of what I taste is worth half that.

Yet consumers seem to like the plushness and lack of food-oriented acidity that mark the majority of these innocuous blends.

Steelhead Red (see Wine of the Week) is a classic example of how to do it right. Another top blender in California is Murrieta’s Well from Livermore Valley, which makes a lovely red wine blend called The Spur and a white (The Whip) whose

blending components change year by year. See Tasting Notes.