

Notre Vin - Wines Without Borders...

What does French Winemaker + California Terroir equal?
"Notre Vin" and a few other wines with blurry borders...



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In a world wine market awash with easy drinking Sauvignon Blancs it's not often that one stumbles upon a cerebral Savvy – well, not unless you satisfy your sav blanc cravings with the creamy Pouilly Fumés of the Loire.

But take a French winemaker who learned his craft at a First Growth Bordeaux Château and married a trained Sommelier – then transplant the couple in the California terroir and “voilà!” – a cerebral Savvy is born.

Winemaker Denis Malbec was literally raised at Château Latour where his father worked as Cellar Master at the château. He followed in his father's footsteps working first as a cellar hand before ultimately becoming an Oenologist and Cellar Master at Latour for 6 years overseeing the vintages from 1994 – 1999. He didn't even venture very far to find his wife, May-Britt, since she was also working at the château doing public relations.

In 2003 the winemaking couple a.k.a “Malbec & Malbec” carried their passion for wine to California to produce their own label – *Notre Vin* – meaning ‘our wine’ in French. At the same time they became consulting winemakers for several top-end Napa and Sonoma vineyards including Blankiet Estates and Kapcsandy.

New Terroir meets Old Technique

It's no surprise that Denis and May-Britt make wines that reflect a certain French “je ne sais pas quoi” – still there's plenty of California in the wines too. Case in point: the “Captûre” is a perfect example of a Bordeaux-styled Sauvignon Blanc but with a fleshier, rounder west-coast character on the nose and a surprising amount of crunchy and crisp freshness on the finish – something many California Sauvignon Blancs lack. There is a hint of Bordeaux in the wine style – much like the hint of France in the name; they added an unnecessary ^ over the “u” to give consumers a clue that it's made with a French twist.

They make an even more serious Sauvignon Blanc – *Alienor* - that's a creamy rich blend of wines made and aged differently – 1/3 aged in new oak for 14 months on lees, 1/3 barrel fermented in old oak, and 1/3 fermented in steel tank. Following a long established Fumé Blanc California tradition the Alienor has added finesse and balance that is unmistakably French inspired. This is a classy – and pricy – Sav Blanc!

Enough about Sauvignon Blanc...what about the reds?



The toughest job for a consulting winemaker is to do his/her job for multiple vineyards and wineries without making everyone's wines taste the same. Like a chef who leaves a signature style on a dish, winemakers bring individual techniques and preferences to their work – which can leave a signature on the wine style.

But the decisions are not entirely in the winemaker's hands. Contract winemakers also must take into account their boss' wine style preferences plus work with unique vineyard site and vintage conditions each year. The Malbec's succeeded in making two very distinct, terrior-driven wines with the *Notre Vin* and *Kapcsandy* wines. Even though both have a dominant amount of Cab Sav in the blend the wines could not be more different in the glass.

The 2003 *Notre Vin* Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, which was the first vintage the Malbec's produced, has classic blackcurrant/cab sav aromas, finely woven tannins, and a fresh, lithe finish. It isn't overly concentrated yet has plenty of juicy fruit flavours – a great result for a first vintage.

The 2005 Kapcsandy Cabernet Sauvignon, State Lane Vineyard is a bigger, fuller-bodied wine with dense, complex aromas and a palate to match. With only 450 cases made the aim was to make a top-quality wine with potential to age. At the moment the '05 is drinking well; its richly textured with a densely concentrated fruit core. Still, it will definitely improve with time.

Denis and May-Britt also produce a Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, the Clos Madeleine. Much like their Cab Sav, the 2006 *Notre Vin* Pinot Noir harkens back to France with its subtle nose that opens up slowly to reveal layers of warm Bing cherry and raspberry compote, vanilla and crushed spice aromas. Denis is mindful of heavy-handed oak treatment so doesn't overdo it even though the barrel ageing definitely shows through in the finished.

The resulting pinot showcases the fruit first – supporting the fruit with very fine grained tannins and a good amount of natural acidity bring balance and length. *Notre Vin* also doesn't drink "hot" with alcohol on the finish – something that California Pinots are prone to do.

What came through in the tasting is how blurry the lines between the Old and New World are becoming; the new mobility of the global winemaker and an overall emphasis on improving wine quality is making the wine world a little smaller stylistically. Say what you want about *terroir* – in the end it's also all about producing the best quality wine possible for the consumer. The Malbecs are doing their part!

Notre Vin, Kapcsandy, and Blanquet Estates wines are imported by Water & Wine