

CONUNDRUM

WINE HISTORY

Conundrum was born from a core idea: why couldn't a wine mirror—in complexity and creativity—the dishes being invented by a new generation of chefs who had no allegiance to the traditions and rules of the past? From our first vintage, 1989, we were determined to make a dramatically different white-wine blend that would surpass the scope of single-varietal wines.

Blending several grape varieties together is a centuries-old tradition for both red and white wines. Vintners learned early on that just a small amount of Cabernet Franc or Merlot could complement and extend the flavors of Cabernet Sauvignon and that a little Sémillon could round and soften the herbal edges of Sauvignon Blanc. But we wanted to venture into a wider arena. Just as chefs were exploring the fusion of flavors from classic to contemporary, from east to west, often combining savory, spicy, herbal and fruity flavors in one dish, we wanted to explore how non-traditional combinations of grape varieties would work together. We wanted each variety to be distinctive but still complementary to the others and to the foods we were enjoying.

After experimenting with 11 different white wine grapes, we chose the three that we considered the key ingredients, the aromas and flavors that form the foundation of the wine: Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and—for its intriguing floral/tropical character—Muscat Canelli. Then, from our “spice cabinet,” we added small amounts of Sémillon and Viognier. Already, we were working with flavors and textures that formed a new and unprecedented combination—a conundrum, or puzzle to be teased out by the taster.

To make the blend even more complex, we took the same approach we used when making red wine: we treated each small lot or portion of wine separately, respecting its unique flavor profile. This approach starts in the vineyards, where we expanded the number of rootstocks and clones we planted. It extends to harvest decisions, as we pick each grape variety at several different levels of ripeness and acidity within the spectrum we are seeking. It continues in winemaking, as we ferment some wine lots in stainless steel and some in oak barrels, varying the yeast to complement the character of each. Similarly, we keep some lots in cool-temperature stainless steel to maintain some fresh, crisp aromas and fruit flavors, and age some in seasoned barrels and a small portion of new barrels so that oak flavors remain subtle. As a result, when the time comes to blend the wine, we have not just five lots representing the five varieties, but sixty or more components, each offering its own aromas, flavors and textures. That's when the creative juices begin to flow.

The proportions vary slightly in each vintage, as Mother Nature hands us new “ingredients.” But our goal is always the same: a wine whose complexity makes it appealing to both red and white wine drinkers, a highly styled wine that is excellent as an apéritif and pairs beautifully with the wide-ranging, global dishes we are eating as chefs experiment with fresher and more healthful cuisines that depend on vegetables, herbs, spices and creative preparation techniques to achieve intensity of flavor.

Conundrum stands on its own as an independent brand, still owned by the Wagner family. Caymus Vineyards, where Conundrum was developed, now focuses exclusively on Cabernet Sauvignon. Plans are moving ahead for a dedicated Conundrum facility in Monterey County, close to the sources for most of the grape varieties that make up the wine.