



How to Find Terroir-Driven Wines

Next time you come across a single-vineyard wine, here's what you need to know.

By **Brian Freedman** | Published on January 17, 2024



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Earlier this year, Champagne Telmont released a wine with GPS coordinates on the label. Its full name is *Lieux-Dits Damery Parcelle Sous Adrien 2012 Extra Brut*, and that language conveys a highly specific sense of place regarding where the Pinot Meunier grapes for this fascinating, delicious Champagne were grown.

On the other end of the labeling spectrum, I recently tasted two terrific vintages of Leviathan, a well-respected red blend by renowned winemaker Andy Erickson labeled, simply, as coming from California. Both the 2021 and 2014 vintages were excellent, the former full of bright fruit and aging potential, the latter mature, velvety, and still with plenty of energy in reserve...something that, in many ways, runs counter to wisdom about what to expect of wines with large geographical areas noted on the label.



Erickson — who is one of the great translators of specific terroirs into iconic wines — has found a way to bridge the gap with Leviathan. “The beauty of single vineyard wines is that it really is a pure expression of that little slice of terroir from each specific vintage,” he notes. “The challenge is that, depending on the vineyard, it can be a very limited quantity of wine. The larger the appellation, the less specific but the more consistent the expression year to year.” With Leviathan, Erickson and his team look at the entirety of California as a single appellation, rather than a patchwork of smaller ones. It’s an important distinction: He and his team are looking to individual standout sites for this wine and bringing them together with excellent vision and harmony, while other wines labeled as coming from entire states are often more likely to be crafted from bulk juice. “We have vineyards in some amazing locations, and by seeing them as all being in the same appellation, we can knit together a beautiful blend and share the wine with more people,” he says. “I love the concept.”

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Jasmine Hirsch, winemaker and general manager of Hirsch Vineyards, in the Sonoma Coast, says that, blending juice from different sites allows her team to adjust for the vagaries of the vintage and vineyard. She notes that blending isn’t needed if a vineyard is of consistently exceptional quality, which is why winemakers exercise great discipline in making single vineyard wines. “If you can make a better wine year after year through blending multiple vineyards, that’s a smarter choice than bottling an inferior wine just so it can be labeled and priced as a single vineyard wine.” (Hirsch’s single-vineyard wines are famously fantastic.)

Brion Wise, owner of BRION in Napa Valley, only produces single-vineyard wines for his eponymous label. “To me, the advantages are all in the expression of a singular place, a singular terroir, and a consistency,” he explains. “Year after year, the same vines produce what is essentially the same wine, in contrast to a multi-vineyard blend which may vary significantly based on what disparate grapes or plots the winemaker chooses to blend.”

Even within single vineyards, winemakers have options for blending, and the process is often an important part of single vineyard wines. “When blending, we as winemakers have options to play with, even within, a single vineyard,” says Sam Kaplan, winemaker for Arkenstone, Memento Mori, Vida Valiente, and MAXEM. “Whether I’m focusing on different plots within that site, or (as is the case at Arkenstone Estate), working with different varieties in the same vineyard, [blending] gives me the ability to highlight the site and vintage with



the different tools of blending components within the same site. Kaplan adds that great sites have shown themselves to be great over time, whether it be through a highly unique character, consistent wine quality, or simply because quite often the best sites can shine in great or challenging vintages.

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Finding those top sites can be tricky. David Ramey, winemaker and co-founder of Ramey Wine Cellars, points out that not all individual vineyards should be bottled as such. “Not every vineyard is special enough to merit vineyard designation,” he says. “Many sites are terrible, either through poor soil, poor climate, and/or poor plant materials — not to mention poor farming and poor winemaking. Regional or AVA bottlings will more truly show their characteristics than, say, a California appellation—Russian River Valley wines have a distinct character compared to Lodi wines, or even Carneros. But a single vineyard wine may well be sourced from a crappy vineyard.”

Single-vineyard wines are also riskier in terms of the bottom line. “There are climate, disease, and yield risks [to making a single-vineyard wine], to name a few,” says Flora Chang, vintner of Plinth Wine in Napa Valley. “If we’re only committing to making wines from those specific vineyards, any one of those may mean a vintage in which wine isn’t produced. We produce both vineyard-designated wines as well as blends from various turfs in the Napa Valley. That allows us to showcase some of the things we love about a particular site while also allowing us to experiment and offset some of the risks.”

Many producers do the same. Cakebread, for example, offers their beloved Napa Valley Chardonnay for \$40, but they have also released a \$300 four-bottle, single-vineyard Chardonnay pack in honor of their 50th anniversary. Fans of Burgundy can enjoy a taste of the region for under \$30 with the Prosper Maufoux Hautes-Côtes de Nuits, a top village wine with Domaine Dujac’s Morey Saint-Denis for a bit under \$200, or the glories of one of the great Grand Cru vineyards like Domaine Faiveley’s Musigny for a few thousand.

The key is to know what you’re looking for, what budget you’d like to stay within, and what you’re hoping to get out of the wine. Delicious ones that tell the story of where they’re from can be found across the spectrum.
