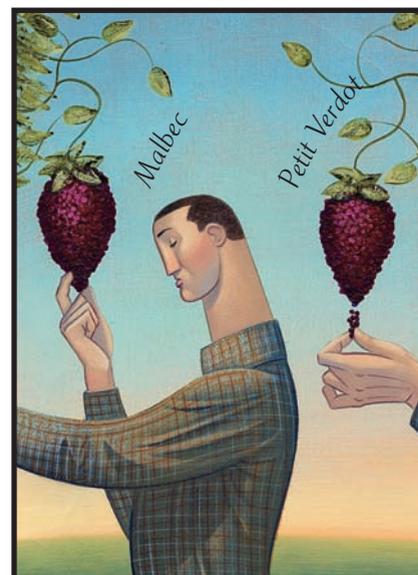
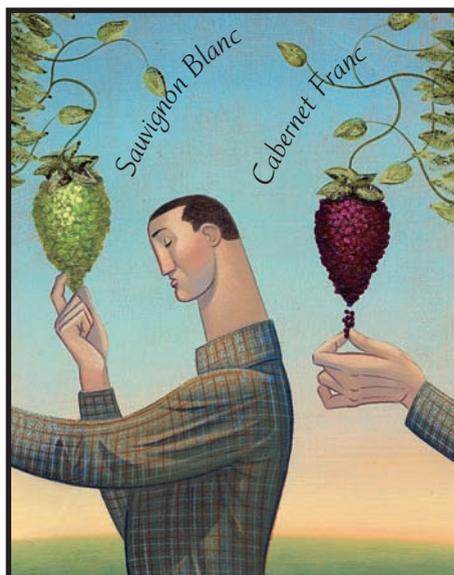
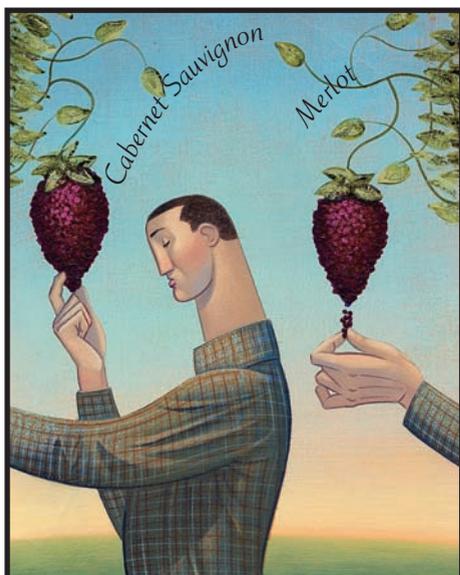


Taking Stock of Meritage

Few understand it. Most mispronounce it. But after 20 years, Meritage is still hanging around. Why? Maybe because it's the wine that helped California define itself on its own terms.



IMITATION IS THE HIGHEST FORM OF FLATTERY. THAT'S HOW THIS STORY BEGINS, IN California during the pre-wineboom '80s. Progressive Napa and Sonoma vintners were consciously emulating the blended wines developed over centuries in Bordeaux, France. And they liked the results. Cabernet Sauvignon + Merlot = Yum. Sauvignon Blanc + Sémillon = Yum as well.

Unfortunately, there was a problem: American wines whose primary grape fell below the 75 percent threshold had to be labeled “table wine,” which was the marketplace equivalent of a dunce cap in those days of “fighting varietals.” Moreover, believing that their splendid blends were at the cutting edge of California viticulture, vintners felt the wines deserved more recognition, from critics and consumers alike, not to mention a better way to stand proudly apart from their French prototypes.

What to do? In 1988, a group led by principals from the Napa Valley wineries Franciscan, Flora Springs, and Cosentino came up with an utterly American solution: a contest! Some 6,000 international entries later, the term Meritage — intended to embody “merit” and “heritage” — was coined. The ensuing Meritage Association sought both to define and defend this nascent genre. The trademarked term was allowed to be used only by dues-paying wineries. On a conceptual level, Meritage represented a declaration of independence for these blends, both from the ignominy of “table wine” and from the referential shadow of Bordeaux. ▶▶

By W.R. Tish
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of Quad/Photo



MERITAGE BASICS

- Red Meritage is made from a blend of two or more of the following varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and Petit Verdot. White Meritage is made from Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon. In either case, no single variety can make up more than 90 percent of the blend.
- Meritage is a trademarked name; only dues-paying members of the Meritage Association are entitled to use the term. Some Meritage wines also carry a proprietary name, yet many proprietary blends are not Meritage.
- The composition of a winery's Meritage is not restricted to estate vineyards and can change in sourcing and proportions from vintage to vintage.
- Originally, association rules included limits on production (25,000 cases) and required that a winery's Meritage be its first or second highest-priced wine. Both of these restrictions have been eliminated.



Over the next decade, however, the association foundered, hitting a low point of only 22 members in 1999. A tactical move that year proved vital. Shifting focus from protection of the trademark to education and promotion yielded remarkable results. Membership hit 100 by 2003; it now stands at more than 160, including wineries in five other countries. But has Meritage really arrived? With the 20-year milestone upon us, this seems an appropriate time to give the M-word a pulse check.

STICKING AROUND

For purists, Meritage is easily dismissed. How dare a bunch of self-interested California producers think they can invent an entire category within a culture whose genres have evolved naturally around grapes, regions, and market-tested genres? On the other hand, my experience as a wine speaker has led me to accept that the word has indeed stuck, albeit more like a Post-it note than Super Glue. When I lead tastings and ask people if they know what grape is in Sancerre, for example, the response is typically a roomful of blank stares. (It's Sauvignon Blanc, by the way.) But when the question is, "What is the official name of Bordeaux-style wine made in California?" — hands shoot up. And invariably, the answer is Meritage ... but pronounced "Meri-TAHJ," which is technically incorrect. By design, the word is supposed to rhyme with *heritage*. The fact that the term is routinely spoken with a French inflection adds a dose of delicious irony: Americans clearly still view wine in general as having European

roots. Yet recognition of this uniquely American wine term has now surpassed many of the most basic European terms. Is Meritage close enough to a household name to declare that it has arrived?

Let's take a closer look at some pros and cons, starting with the nay-saying side. Here are four strikes against Meritage:

1. **Pet names rule.** Before *and* after the Meritage Association was formed in 1988, many wineries intent on making high-quality blends took a simpler route to distinguishing their wines from plonk: they gave them proprietary names. To this day, the lion's share of top-tier Napa and Sonoma Cabernet-Merlot blends are not made by card-carrying wineries. Joseph Phelps (Insignia), Clos du Bois (Marlstone), and Rubicon Estate (Rubicon) are a few of the most famous proprietary un-Meritages. Similarly, Opus One, Cardinale, Dominus, Harlan, and Pahlmeyer are acclaimed eponymous blends that don't play the Meritage game.

2. **Meritage is not grounded.** The grapes blended in Bordeaux are based on the age-old practice of combining grapes in the bottles that grow well side by side. Meritage is modeled on the same grape varieties, but the vines can be located anywhere, or even sourced from diverse locations, which is completely antithetical to the spirit of French viticulture. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, with Meritage, there is not necessarily any *there* there. The commonality of Meritage is built on paper, not *terroir*.

3. **Meritage cramps style.** Telling a winemaker what grapes to use is like telling a chef to use only certain ingredients. No matter how grand the tradition of Bordeaux grapes may be, there are countless delicious blends being made in California and beyond by winemakers experimenting with novel combos of varieties.

4. **White Meritage is practically extinct.** The Meritage Association might have 100-plus members, but you can count on one hand the member wineries that bottle a white. But it's not like nobody is making varietally labeled Sauvignon Blancs. What does this say about the original concept of blending in the Bordeaux tradition? To me, it says California is still discovering itself, and in their focus on vineyards across the Atlantic, the Meritageers may have overlooked the essential strengths of their own turf, and/or misjudged the interests of their home market. Either way, even among people who recognize the word Meritage, few think of it as red *or* white.

SWIMMING TOWARD THE MAINSTREAM

To take the "pro" side in the Meritage debate, it helps to get in the California mood. As in *chill*. Don't worry so much about rules. After all, Meritage is just a wine concept. And there is little doubt that Meritage has seeped broadly into the American wine lexicon. Countless American wine shops and wine lists separate Meritage when organizing their wares, some by the book, some not — but the fact they even attempt



to do so spells r-e-s-p-e-c-t. As for semantic propriety, current Meritage Association president Michaela Rodeno, CEO of St. Supéry winery in Napa, says, “I’m just pleased when people use ‘Meritage,’ even if they massacre the pronunciation. I usually let them know its derivation, which should help them remember how to say it, but some people don’t want to believe it. It seems fatally French, even to the French — they of all people should know better. It’s not in the *Grand Larousse* ... yet.”

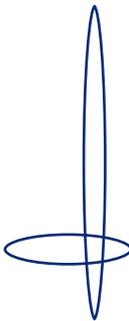
For further evidence of Meritage’s foothold in our culture, look at how the term has extended beyond wine. Dozens of high-end restaurants and cafés from coast to coast have adopted the name as their own. Ditto enterprises that have nothing to do with wine. Businesses as disparate as financial firms, a planned community (in Las Vegas), a luxury resort (in, where else, Napa), even a car wash have found enough merit in Meritage to poach the name as well. Credit fuzzy logic, or perhaps unfussy acceptance; either way, Meritage on a label — or a sign — has gone mainstream. And in a backhanded compliment, Meritage as a wine genre has achieved enough traction to attract counterfeits — or, to be precise, improperly labeled blends. One appeared recently from France — *sacre bleu!*

TRENDS IN BLENDS

Obviously, association membership does not cover all of the Meritage-ous wines being made from Cabernet, Merlot, and kin. In fact, you don’t even have to be a winery to make your own these days. The Blending Cellar at Mayo Family Winery in Sonoma Valley offers a complete blending workshop at its Glen Ellen tasting room; erstwhile Meritage makers can taste and combine varying proportions of single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Malbec — then arrange to have their effort bottled and custom-labeled. Want to funk up your blend?

Bennett Lane Winery in Napa offers a custom blending experience with Cabernet, Merlot, and (gasp) Syrah. Neither of these do-it-yourself opportunities are really Meritage, but it was Meritage that made them possible.

In reality, Meritage has become an emblem for the heightened importance blending has assumed in New World viticulture. Some wineries embrace it officially, others deliberately choose a different path; but either way, the notion of creating better wine through blending has emerged as a vital reference point. Whitehall Lane and Merryvale, for example, are both Napa wineries that let their Meritage membership lapse, but whose varietal and proprietary wines still hinge on the Bordeaux-grapes model. At Cab-centric Laurel Glen Winery on Sonoma Mountain, proprietor Patrick Campbell says, “Over the years, we have grown all five Bordeaux varietals, and none of them individually were as good as the Cabernet Sauvignon we grow,



PAIRING FAVORITES

Agustin Huneeus, one of Meritage’s founding vintners, thinks one of the best gauges of Meritage’s success 20 years later is the fact that “every sommelier in America knows what it is.” This is certainly true with the food and beverage professionals I spoke with at several ClubCorp clubs. They all also acknowledged that it is routinely mispronounced. Here is a peek at some of their favorite Cab-Merlot blends (some Meritage, some not) and dishes to complement:

Dominus Estate 2004 Napa Valley. Rib roast with a garlic and horseradish crust.

**Jeff Goldworn, general manager
Buckhead Club, Atlanta**

Pedestal 2004 Columbia Valley. Seared duck breast and blackberry jus.

**Thomas Trause, general manager in training
Columbia Tower Club, Seattle**

Justin 2005 “Justification,” Paso Robles (primarily Cabernet Franc). Barbecue or spicier food.

**David Ohr, club sommelier
Metropolitan Club, Chicago**

Beaulieu Vineyard 2002 Tapestry, Napa Valley. Well-marbled steak.

**Jim MacDonough, general manager
Morgan Run Resort & Club, Rancho Santa Fe, California**

DeLorimier 1999 Mosaic, Alexander Valley. Smoked filet mignon.

**Isaias Ledesma, operations director
City Club on Bunker Hill, Los Angeles**



and the addition of none of them made a better wine than the Cabernet separately. So why bother, other than for fashion?" On the other hand, Campbell is a huge blending advocate, as represented by his non-Meritage REDS table wine, designed to incorporate different California-grown varietals every vintage to achieve a consistently fruit-driven flavor profile. The winery Fourteen, which blends one ton of representative grapes from each of Napa Valley's subdistricts (indeed, recognition of Pope Valley as an official viticultural area prompted the winery to change its name from Thirteen to Fourteen starting with the 2004 harvest). At Flora Springs, one of the association's founding wineries, winemaker Ken Deis begins each year by sampling blends from the previous five vintages when creating the winery's Trilogy. But he is never forced to repeat the past, and even incorporates up to five grapes despite the wine's three-grape moniker. In short, Meritage blending is not a matter of formula, it is a vehicle for self-expression.

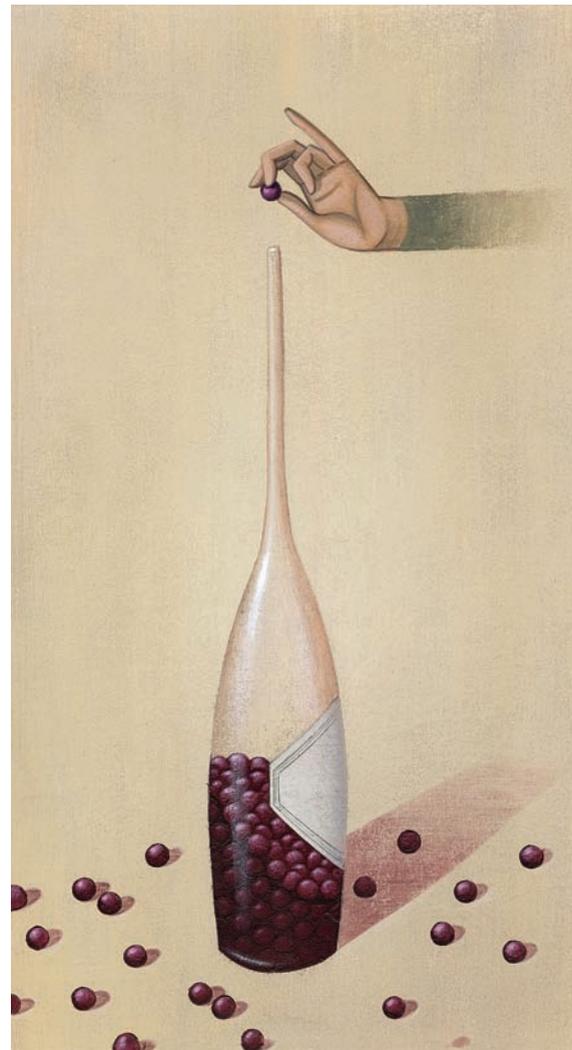
FUTURE WINE STARS

Perhaps the greatest argument for the success of Meritage is the degree to which blending Cabernet and Merlot has proven to be a launchpad for stellar newly minted wines. Quintessa, an estate founded in Napa's Rutherford area by Agustin Huneeus, a Meritage pioneer when he was with Franciscan in the 1980s, was never even planted to vines before 1990; but the mix of Bordeaux varieties from this swath of land has been sublime from its 1994 vintage debut on. Frank Family Vineyards, a young winery based on a very old wine-growing property, had no trouble establishing itself with a 100-percent Cabernet starting with the 1998 harvest. Yet as the winery has evolved, proprietor Rich Frank has encouraged his winemaker to expand the portfolio by incorporating other Bordeaux varieties. Faster than you can say *voilà*, three blended wines — a Reserve Cabernet, Winston Hill, and Promise — have surpassed the pure Cabernet in complexity and, accordingly, prestige. On the flip side of the Cab-Merlot equation, consider the out-of-the-gate success of Blackbird Vineyards Merlot, whose inaugural release was a 2003. At more than 90 percent Merlot, it could not be a Meritage even if it wanted to be; but there is little doubt that the judicious blending of Cabernet Sauvignon helped nudge the wine from excellent to cultishly delish.

If my pro-Meritage commentary seems to keep returning to Napa Valley, it should not be a surprise. Napa has always been at the forefront of American wine. What is especially fascinating with respect to Meritage is that while this novel genre was born there, its growth has spread far and wide. Of the 160-something members, the vast majority is outside Northern California, leading me to wonder whether Meritage-making wineries are now targeting the Napa model as much as they are the original Bordeaux template. It makes sense, of course. Just as the Napans of the 1980s aimed to hitch their success loosely on France, vintners from the New World are looking to Napa for inspiration. The hunter has become the hunted. *Touché*.

Where does this leave Meritage? Not far from where we started: imitation as a sign of flattery. It remains a work in progress, still broadly misunderstood despite increasing recognition, and it likely will never (officially) represent more than a fraction of the world's blended wines. But in retrospect, its impact has been profound. Someday the word Meritage may make it into the dictionary. Even if it doesn't, its existence can be seen as a shifty but significant turning point, leading New World vintners to use conscientious blending to take control of their own wine destinies. ♦♦

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RECOMMENDED CALIFORNIA CABERNET-MERLOT BLENDS

(some are technically Meritage,
some are not)

ANY DAY DRINKING:

Beringer Alluvium (Knights Valley);
Dry Creek Vineyard (Sonoma);
Estancia (Paso Robles).

FOR CELLARING:

Clos du Val Reserve; Joseph Phelps
"Insignia"; Rubicon Estate "Rubicon"
(all Napa Valley).

NAPA UNDER THE RADAR:

Blackbird; Chimney Rock "Elevage";
Matthiasson; Paradigm; Robert Craig
"Affinity"; St. Supéry "Elu";
Quintessa; Vérité (Sonoma).

BEYOND NAPA:

Bernardus "Marinus" (Monterey);
Chateau St. Jean "Cinq Cépages";
Justin "Isosceles" (Paso Robles);
Stonestreet "Legacy" (Sonoma).