

An aerial photograph of a rural landscape, likely in France, showing a patchwork of green and brown agricultural fields. A winding river or stream flows through the center of the image. In the background, a small village with red-roofed buildings is visible. The text "Domaine La Colombe" and "Curzilles" Vertical - 2016-2010 is overlaid in white on the right side of the image.

Domaine La Colombe

"Curzilles" Vertical - 2016-2010

February 3, 2019

Silvio Jermann's iconic Vintage Tunina may not have been the first field blend I ever tasted, but it was the first that made me aware of the term.

I remember ordering a bottle in 1977 at the high-concept, Milan-inspired trattoria, Ciao, on Union Street in San Francisco. I think it was the first vintage—1975—but it may have been the second. No matter, it was an intriguing mix of white grapes grown in the same vineyard, harvested together, and co-fermented in temperature-controlled tanks. Yes, at the time, temperature-controlled fermentation was still quite new in Italy.

I also remember that it expressed the aroma and flavor of green almonds—what some call *noyau*—better than anything I'd had before and everything since. In that regard, it's still a benchmark.

My chance introduction to this groundbreaking Italian white coincided with the heady days of the new California wine boom, when the term "field blend" represented the old way of doing things. Little did I know that many of California's heritage vineyards were, in fact, composed of "mixed blacks"—a grab bag that includes Zinfandel, Carignane, petite Sirah, Mourvèdre, Syrah, Grenache and Alicante Bouschet—planted randomly together in the same vineyard

Back in the day this sort of assemblage was commonly found in cheap jugs, which, if you knew your way around, offered great value and uncomplicated drinking. For instance, a savvy buyer knew that Foppiano "Burgundy" was dominated by petite Sirah, while Simi was mostly Carignane, and Sebastiani was heavy on the Zinfandel. Each had a distinctive style and a surprising capacity to age. But as the era of the jug receded, California's vineyards morphed into monoculture and its wines into mono-varietal monotony.

It's a miracle these scraggly, head-trained and mixed-pedigree vines survived. But thanks to old-vine proponents, like Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards and Joel Peterson of Ravenswood, they did, and continue to do so despite pressure from developers. Their names, you may have noticed, are immortalized on the labels of some iconic wines. What California wine lover hasn't heard of Dickerson, Evangelho, Jimsomare, Lytton Estate, Pagani Ranch or Puccini? Now these special sites are protected as living museums and are the source material for some of the most coveted wines in the state. What goes around, comes around.

Europe, too, has a long tradition of field blends but it is only within the last decade that the practice is being revisited by a new generation. In a nod to vine diversity and authenticity the field blend is seen by a few as the best path to the clearest expression of *terroir*. Interestingly, many of the new field blends in Europe are focused on white varieties, like Vintage Tunina, while in California they are still mostly based on old-vine reds.

Jean-Michel Deiss in Alsace has revived the old custom of interplanting his Grand Cru sites with multiple varieties. His goal: to express the site rather than the grape. There may be other benefits as well. Anecdotal evidence suggests that disease resistance may be heightened and treatments reduced in interplanted vineyards. The diversity of plant material may be one reason—sustainable vineyards practices another.

As far as I can tell, Switzerland has no lingering tradition of mixed vineyards. The post-phylloxera reconstitution with common varieties has seen to that. But that doesn't mean there is no current interest.

Steve Bettschen, the thoughtful wine philosopher from La Sarraz, has just released his first field blend, “**La Roche Fleurie**” *blanc*, which comes from a mixed planting in Neuveville where each variety corresponds to a particular terrace. There is also a red version, “**Le Rouge des Rochettes**”, from the same site.

Coincidentally, Switzerland’s longest tenured field blend (at least to my knowledge) is from one of Steve’s mentors, Raymond Paccot. His **Curzilles** *cuvée*, from a parcel of the same name, is a ten-year old experiment that is just now offering significant results. The site’s pedigree was confirmed by noted soil biologists Claude and Lydia Bourguignon who admired the living soils and vein of calcareous marl beneath forty centimeters of compact silt. It is planted to a Swiss mix of Chasselas, Doral, Pinot Gris and Riesling and is biodynamically farmed, harvested together and co-fermented in concrete eggs.

Two things stick out upon tasting this lineup.

First is the cashew-like texture across the board. Raymond likes to point out that texture is the real sign of *terroir*. In my tastings it’s also a product of fermentation in concrete eggs and *sur lie* aging.

Second is the lovely, understated aroma and freshness of each wine. There is nothing loose-knit about them. I like the compactness and sheer delicacy of each. In a way, they remind me of Vintage Tunina without the weight and richness. The varietal mix probably has something to do with that.

The event was held for invited guests in the tasting room of Domaine La Colombe with Raymond and Violaine Paccot and cellar master Arnaud Mathey in attendance. The wines were not tasted blind.



2016: Pale straw in color. Opens with a bright lemony nose and a touch of reduction. Cashew-textured palate carries with it clean flavors of lemon, tangerine and fresh milk. Finishes on a high note with bright acids and a subtle citrus perfume. This should develop nicely. (16 October harvest)

2015: Medium-straw in color. Some development on the nose with a bit of lowland Scotch sweetness (think: marshmallow). Some matchstick notes, as well. Palate is rich and fat with candied nuts, pomelo and tongue-tingling acids. Real weight with balance. Finishes crisp and clean. This one has really fine potential.

2014: Medium-straw in color. Flat, wet wool aroma. Clearly some oxidation. Palate is flat and disjointed with some reluctant fruit upon chewing. This was the second bottle opened after Raymond and team rejected the first. Drink up.

2013: Pale straw in color. Very pretty nose with some shy dairy notes and a bit of caramel. Fresh and light in texture with lots of lemon and some nuttiness. Delicate with some fine acids. This is a very pretty wine and potentially very fine. I think it still needs some time to really sing. (19 October harvest)

2012: Pale straw in color. The floral nose seems to accentuate the Riesling component. It’s unique among the group in that way. It is beautifully textured (cashew) with cream, mixed citrus and white flowers. Flavors are broad and the palate weighty but balanced. Still young but also in a perfect drinking moment. One of my two favorites. (12 October harvest)

2011: Medium straw in color. Delicate lemony nose. Beautifully balanced with lemon and fresh herb flavors. Shows a bit of the cashew creaminess common to the group. A lighter interpretation of the Curzilles theme. Very nice but a bit more simple than the rest. (26 September harvest)

2010: Pale gold in color. A bit more Chasselas showing through with honey, caramel and roasted nuts. The palate is decadent, but balanced, with more honey, brown butter, pink peppercorn, and dried fruit. Extremely successful first vintage that demonstrates the inherent balance and richness attainable with this raw material. *My coup de cœur*.

<https://artisanswiss.com/2019/02/03/domaine-la-colombe-curzilles-vertical-2016-2010/>