

Grapes: What's in a Name? (1)

(An Opinionated Multi-part Series about the Names of Wine, Grapes, Grape Areas and Wineries, number 22 in the overall series)

Every bottle of wine you buy has at least three names; sometimes four. Much of the naming is determined by the dutiful government servants at the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Bureau, but some of it is stuff we dream up all by ourselves. One name no wine can do without is the name of the winery that produces it—that is, unless it's going under an alias.

Name it Yourself

In order to produce wine for commercial sale, you must have filled out reams of paperwork, obtained a bond, been photographed, fingerprinted, inspected, rejected, dejected, neglected and finally have obtained the most important “name” your winery will have: the Bonded Winery Number. When you apply for it, you decide exactly how you would like the government to identify you for all time, and you can choose from several different styles. If you don't want it to sound like you actually *make* wine, you can call yourself the “Baker Vineyard,” as at least five of the current El Dorado wineries do. If you want to be more upfront about your activities, you can be known as “Baker Winery,” the choice of ten or so local wineries; and if you want to put it all out there, you can choose to be “Baker Vineyards and Winery,” as three others have decided. Nobody really seems to pay any attention, and sometimes it has more to do with the structure of the business, and whether you want to write yourself a check each year for the grapes you deliver from your vineyard to your winery. Lots of variations exist—you can be Baker Wine Cellars, Baker Hill, Baker Valley, Les Chai de Baker, Baker Weinkellerei, or almost anything else that isn't false, rude or misleading.

The Exotic Names

Actually, relatively few wineries are named after the person who built them (For one thing, it makes the business much harder to sell to someone else after you realize that your kids are so much smarter than you that they want nothing to do with a winery). A popular alternative is to look around the property for a unique natural or geographical feature that you can use as a name. A tree or a rock might seem to be fairly unique, but a casual search will show you that many others were equally “unique” before you—the following winery names show a common thread: Silver Oak, White Oak, Black Oak, Oak Knoll, Fair Oaks, Oak Crest, Oakwood, Oak Ridge, Oak Spring, Oakville Ranch, Stover Oaks, Zillah Oaks; as do Stonegate, Stone Mountain, Stone Age, Stone Bluff, Stonewall, Stone Hill, Stone Wolf, Stone Creek, Stone Church, Stone's Throw; and finally there are Field Stone, Greenstone, Ironstone, Firestone, Blackstone, Standing Stone, and, oh yes, Oakstone! All of which leads to the distorted memory of a childhood chestnut—“Oaks and stones may break my bones, but names will only haunt me.”

A.K.A.

But, suppose for a moment that you make some wine that isn't quite as good as you would like it to be, but you'd like to sell it without damaging your reputation. The BATF allows you to have additional names, as long as no one has claimed them, under the description of "Doing Business As" (DBA). That way, Baker Winery can sell their substandard wine as Smith Vineyards (and if you sell it in a distant location, no one will ever know that Baker made some pretty awful stuff but decided to sell it anyway). This is especially helpful for the custom crush arrangements we described in an earlier article. If the Johnsons want to start a winery, they can contract with the Bakers to make their wine, and build up a vintage or two while they fill out the paperwork, fight with the county, plant some grapes and gradually dissipate whatever small fortune they started with. If Baker applies for a DBA as "Johnson Cellars," the only place it appears is in tiny letters at the very bottom of the label (where it says "Produced and Bottled by Johnson Cellars"), while the name Johnson appears in big, embossed gold foil script letters in the middle of the label. Baker can then make the wine, bottle and label it, and even sell it for the Johnsons if they so agree. After the Johnsons get their own bonded winery number and have the right to bottle their own wine, the small letters at the bottom will change to "Produced and Bottled by Johnson Winery," but not one person in a hundred will ever notice the difference if the rest of the label stays the same.

The Name Game

The next most common name on a label is the name of the wine. Thirty years ago, most American wines carried names that actually belonged to well-known winegrowing regions of, or wine styles from, the Old World: Burgundy, Chablis, Rhine or even Claret. As our winemaking started to become more sophisticated, use of the grape variety as the wine name became popular, and the vast majority of wines today are labeled as the varietal they were made from: Chardonnay, Zinfandel or Cabernet Sauvignon. There was a time when a wine labeled Chardonnay could legally contain 49% of wine made from Thompson Seedless grapes, but today the minimum is 75% of the named variety.

Varietal labeling has become so prevalent, that many of the wines that come from Burgundy or Bordeaux are now brought into the U.S. with labels proudly proclaiming them to be Chardonnay or Merlot. But many wineries still prefer to blend wines to get the best or most consistent flavors, and when no single variety represents 75% of the wine, there is a real problem finding a name that people can recognize and buy. One solution has been to create an entirely new name—instead of labeling a wine Bordeaux (which the ATF strongly discourages, lest the consumer be misled into thinking it was actually *made* in France), a group of vintners got together and held a contest to concoct a new name that means the same as "Bordeaux." The winning entry was "Meritage," a combination of the words 'merit' and 'heritage' (it rhymes with heritage, but almost everyone gives it the French pronunciation of "meritahje," because it sounds more sophisticated). Because this is a more or less organized group, if you want to use the copyrighted name Meritage on your wine, you have to pay a licensing fee of one dollar per case (up to \$500 maximum), and you are required to send two bottles a year to the person who submitted the winning

entry (although he complains that almost no one ever sends the wine).

Many people prefer to make up their own names (and some are just plain cheap), so they try to find a name that reflects something about the nature of the blend or at least the number of grapes involved: Trio, Triune, Mystique, Menage, Melange or even Carousel.

Back to the Future

The popularity of the wines made in specific areas such as the Rhone Valley in France and the Tuscany region of Italy (both of which use a large number of different grapes to produce the wines) has increased dramatically in recent years. Oddly enough, some of the names for these wines have come full circle to the previous style of place names. “Rhone Varietals,” “Super Tuscan Blend” and similar names have once again begun to appear, as have additional proprietary names such as “Fleur de Montagne,” “Migliore” and the like. Many of the wineries producing wines primarily from grapes of the Rhone (the so-called “Rhone Rangers”) have worked on developing identifiable names that indicate that their wines contain grapes such as syrah, mourvedre, grenache, and cinsault. Well-known ones are Bonny Doon’s “Le Cigare Volant” (dedicated to a law passed in the Rhone Valley that prohibited flying saucers, or flying cigars, as the French call them, from landing there) and Sobon Estate “Rhone Rouge,” but my favorite of these is a tee-shirt slogan used by Domaine de la Terre Rouge in our neighboring area of Shenandoah Valley, urging wine drinkers to “Subvert the Varietal Paradigm.”