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# What's in a name? Why you should know the term 'proprietary wine'



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ere are "pop stars," and then there are Taylor, Madonna and Gaga.

There are mausoleums, and then there are the Great Pyramid at Giza, the Taj Mahal and Grant's Tomb.

Some people and things get set apart from the rest. They achieve a one-of-a-kind-ness that takes into account more than the simplest definition of them. Plato wasn't just a deep thinker, Evita wasn't just a government worker, and

Fenway isn't just a baseball stadium. The list goes on. Picasso. Rolex. Stonehenge. Gandhi. Venice. Joan of Arc. Ditka.

The wine world has vineyards that are iconic, and it also has one-of-a-kind wines with names all their own, known as proprietary wines. I guess naming a wine is kind of like naming your house. Elvis people are intrigued by Graceland; wine people are intrigued by proprietary wines. When you take the time to name something, you tell us that it's special — at least to you.

Legally, any wine can be a proprietary wine. All it needs is a name. Often a proprietary wine is a winery's highest-quality offering, similar to a retail chain's flagship store or, say, the waterborne vessel of a commanding officer. But that's not necessarily a rule, either.

Here are six California proprietary wines, all of them containing the red grapes of Bordeaux — predominantly cabernet sauvignon — in their blends. Most of these wines are from Napa Valley, but a proprietary wine can come from anywhere.

The **2012 Joseph Phelps Insignia** (\$240) is a legendary Napa Valley proprietary red wine containing 75 percent cabernet sauvignon, 10 percent merlot, 10 percent petit verdot, 3 percent malbec and 2 percent cabernet franc. After 24 months in new French oak barrels, this wine emerges to offer dark fruits, anise, mocha and a delightful floral character. Power and beauty. And 14.5 percent alcohol.

Only 591 cases of the **2012 Episode** (\$185) were produced by Terlato Vineyards in Napa Valley. Consisting of 51 percent cabernet sauvignon, 39 percent merlot and 10 percent cabernet franc, this blend was aged for 21 months in new French oak barrels and then for 14 more months in the bottle before being released. Expect plum, vanilla, spice and mocha, plus a soft mouthfeel and a long, evolving finish.

The **2011 Duckhorn Vineyards The Discussion**(\$135) starts with herbal aromas and moves into a silky, spicy, red fruit exchange followed by pepper and cocoa. This wine, aged for 24 months in French oak barrels, and combining 62 percent cabernet sauvignon with 29 percent merlot, 6 percent cabernet franc and 3 percent petit verdot, exudes elegance. It is age-worthy, but also ready to drink right now.

Black cherry, smoke, strawberry, pine and cedar all emerge from the **2012 Gamble Family Vineyards Paramount** (\$90). Composed of 33 percent cabernet sauvignon, 32 percent cabernet franc, 30 percent merlot and 5 percent petit verdot, this Napa Valley blend was aged for 20 months in French oak barrels, less than half of them new. Alcohol is dialed back to 14.1 percent, and only 680 cases were produced.

The **2012 Capture Alliance** (\$90) comes from grapes grown in the winery's vineyard in the Spring Mountain District of Napa Valley. Cabernet sauvignon dominates the blend at 87 percent. It is joined by 11 percent merlot and 2 percent cabernet franc, and it all was aged for 18 months in French oak barrels. Expect incense and floral aromas to lead to dark fruits and a slowly developing finish.

Just to prove that great proprietary reds don't all come from Napa, here's one from Paso Robles. The **2012 Justin Isosceles** (\$72) is savory and silky with elements of ripe dark fruits, vanilla, fig, mocha and mint. The winery is known for its Bordeaux-style wines, and this is the top bottle, a blend of 77 percent cabernet sauvignon, 12 percent merlot and 11 percent cabernet franc, with 15.5 percent alcohol.

"Red wine" describes all of the above, but tasting them lets you know that they all deserve special names of their own.

Next week, check back here for some red blends that land a little, to a lot, lower on the price scale.