



WE PLANTED A WINE,
Not a vineyard

Xander Sadie talks about Brookdale's field blends – but what are field blends anyway? **Lorraine Kearney** travels to Paarl to find out

It's red wine season: grey and rainy and cold in the Cape, dry and sunny and cold in most of the rest of the country (yes, KZN, we know you're all still in board shorts and T-shirts).

And this time we're all about field blends: complex, layered, unique. So like a family reunion then, but everybody gets on.

Last month, Brookdale Estate let its Twenty Field Blend 2024 out into the world for the first time. It comprises 20 red varieties, interplanted as bush vines on the estate in 2021.

It also released Sixteen Field Blend 2024, made of 16 white varieties.

They're the first releases under the new team of winemaker Xander Sadie and Assistant Winemaker Shanice du Preez.

Xander has field blends in his DNA. Eben Sadie, his dad, is the man behind The Sadie Family's Skerpioen & 'T Voetpad, both field blends that have reached cult status.

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But he doffs his cap to Shanice, who 'holds the fort in the winery', he says.

We're sitting in the warm lounge at Brookdale's Manor House on a wet Paarl Friday, talking wine while Xander sips a beer. Tucked into the mountains, all mist and mood, it's giving BBC period drama opening scene, but with Syrah instead of tea.

'At Brookdale, we're not just growing grapes, we're growing stories,' he says. Instead of planting a single varietal in neat rows, Brookdale planted a wine – a complex, living blend of grape varieties all jumbled together in a single block.

About Twenty he says: 'This 2024 vintage is the first chapter in a story that will evolve over decades.'

LET THE VINEYARD SPEAK

The idea behind a field blend, Xander explains, is not to spotlight individual varieties. It's the opposite. It's about letting go of control, letting the vineyard speak in its own voice.

In this block, everything's interplanted; some vines they can identify by leaf shape, others are more difficult. 'It's actually quite fun. It keeps you sharp.'

Field blends challenge our need to categorise and label. 'When I first went to Portugal, I kept asking winemakers, "But how much of each variety is in this?" And the answer was always the same: "Just taste the wine. If it's good, what does it matter?"

'That was a lesson for me. In South Africa, our wine culture comes from France, where varieties and rules dominate.'



Field blends are old-world in the best way: rooted in history, in the idea that a vineyard should outlive its planter. In old Europe, ‘people made wine from their father’s vineyards, who made wine from his father’s vineyards and so on. When a vine died, they’d plant a new one, not necessarily of the same variety. And so field blends were born,’ he explains.

‘At Brookdale, we wanted to tap into that legacy.’

BREAK THE RULES, TRUST THE CHAOS

But making a field blend is not easy. Ripeness varies wildly across the block (so less harvest day, more choose your own adventure day). To get it right, they divide the vineyard into five-row sections. ‘We might pick the first row, then skip four, then pick another, then bring those grapes in, press them, and taste to see where the sugars are.’ It’s an exercise in intuition and timing.

‘The Twenty red blend is still young – this is its first vintage, after all – but great red wines usually come from vines that are 20 years old or more, so we’re just getting started,’ Xander says.

Right now, the Twenty is a signal. It says: ‘This is what we’re working on. This is where we’re going.’

Though upfront he’s all about the biology and technology, climate and soil, there’s also a bit of the poet in Xander. ‘Wine, to me, is a storyteller,’ he says. ‘It’s a time capsule.’

Every vintage captures the spirit of a year – the weather, the challenges, the victories. Open a bottle, and it takes you back: Where was I when this wine was made? Some stories are joyful, some are sad, but they’re all worth telling.

So if you ask Xander what grapes are in the Twenty, he’ll tell you it doesn’t



matter. What matters is how it tastes. And that it tells the story of a place, a time, and a bold idea – to plant a wine, not a vineyard.

FIELD BLEND NUTS AND BOLTS

Stay with me. This is where it gets nerdy, but also kind of cool.

A simple but strict-ish definition: a field blend is a wine made of at least two types of grapes that are planted together in the same vineyard, harvested at the same time and fermented together in the winery, even the stubborn ones that ripen late.

Brookdale Estate’s Sixteen, for example, comprises a combination of 16 white Mediterranean varieties. The different types of grape can be grown in single variety rows in the block, or randomly interspersed with each other. This is the way the ancients worked.

Another definition: a block is a distinct parcel of land within a larger vineyard, used to differentiate sections with varying terroir – soil, climate and so on – or to separate different grape varieties. Blocks are often managed and harvested separately. Different zones, different vibes.

TELL ME WHY

Why should winemakers make field blends? There’s the historical significance, sure. But more than that, it’s their ability to showcase unique terroir, and the layers and complexity they can bring to a wine. And let’s be honest, there’s a certain rebel winemaker cool factor going on.

It was the winemaking norm for centuries across most of the wine world before modern viticulture gave over to monoculture, or big blocks of the same grape variety.

Modern viticulture brought better control over ripeness, pest management and disease prevention.

But everything is cyclical (hello distressed Nirvana T-shirts; hello ‘70s Dr. Martens) and modern winemakers are increasingly turning back to the old ways.

Heritage is also key. Drinking memories is a fabulous way to keep them alive. And besides, who doesn’t love a good comeback story, especially when it comes in a glass.

So raise a toast. To stories. To place. To field blends that don’t play by the rules.

‘Field blends are old-world in the best way: rooted in history’



PHOTOS: MATTHEW KEARNEY, COURTESY IMAGES; PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF PRINT AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE

TRY IT FOR YOURSELF

Okay, so not all of these are red, but all are worth drinking.

- ✦ Brookdale Twenty Field Blend 2024: ‘Salted red plum, blueberry, mulberry emerge along a thrill of white pepper,’ say the tasting notes. Look for blood orange freshness, cherries, strawberries, berries. R440 at cellar door. brookdale-estate.com
- ✦ The Fledge & Co Veld Versnit Field Blend: ‘A joyously juicy wine with firmly restrained tannins and medium to light palate weight with ample spice, fruit and “seriousness”’. It has Cinsault, Cabernet Franc and Alicante Bouschet. R210 at Woodstock Liquors woodstockliquors.co.za
- ✦ Brookdale Sixteen Field Blend 2024: ‘Light and lovely,’ say the tasting notes. ‘Visions of flower crowns, of fresh grass trampled underfoot, of white strawberries, cranberries.’ R440 at cellar door brookdale-estate.com
- ✦ Haute Cabrière Chardonnay Pinot Noir Heritage 30 Réserve: fresh citrus flavours underpinned by white peach and red fruit – excellent for pairing. It’s Haute Cabrière’s first field-style blend. R590 at cellar door. cabriere.co.za
- ✦ Stark-Condé The Field Blend: Four varieties – Roussanne and Viognier for richness and texture, Chenin Blanc and Verdelho for bright fruit and acidity – one vineyard block. R285 at The Wine Store --

