

# James Suckling Uncorked

## Rethinking and Freethinking California Blends

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I was thinking again today about the [Grand Tasting](#) during the [California Wine Experience](#) last week, and how some of the most interesting wines I tasted were Rhone blends, in particular the 2005 [M5](#) from the [Margerum Wine Company](#) and the 2004 [Esprit de Beaucastel](#) from [Tablas Creek Vineyard](#). These were both Chateauneuf clones. They were made from blends of Mourvedre, Syrah, Grenache, and Counoise. The M5 also had some Cinsault. I rated both the wines outstanding, or 90-plus points.

What I think is most interesting with these reds is the way they have such richness, but are at the same time balanced. It's why producers in Chateauneuf have always used different varieties in their blends. Different varieties give different character to the wine whether it's the color and structure of the Syrah and Mourvedre or the freshness and fruitiness of the Grenache. I also think that the blend of grapes helps mitigate some of the overly hot and sunny weather conditions in a particular growing area, whether the Southern Rhone Valley or the South Coast of California. The wines can, therefore, be rich and ripe but they don't have to be overly alcoholic and oily.

This may have been one of my personal disappointments of the California Wine Experience. I found too many wines that were thick, oily and alcoholic. Some actually burned my palate. And it didn't seem to matter if they were Cabernet Sauvignons or Pinot Noirs.

This made me think that perhaps more interesting blends are a real possibility in California. Why keep to traditional ones established in France such as Bordeaux blends or Rhone mixtures? Perhaps California winemakers should be more like their counterparts in Spain or Italy, where there's more openness to different blends. Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah? Why not? Or may be Pinot Noir and Cinsault? Hell. I don't know.

But California has always been a freethinking place, at least when I grew up in the southern part of the state. And its winemaking too. That's why the [Perrin](#) family came from Chateauneuf to California and started Tablas Creek Vineyard.



### James Suckling

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