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Maintaining the mystery

NEXT TIME YOU FIND YOURSELF wandering around a bottleshop, try this little exercise: I challenge you to find an Australian wine label that doesn't tell you what grape variety or blend of varieties is inside the bottle.

You'll struggle. Almost every bottle of wine produced in this country has its varietal identity emblazoned on the front, or at least listed on the back ("a blend of 54 per cent cabernet sauvignon and 46 per cent shiraz").

On the whole, of course, this is A Very Good Thing. The introduction of varietal labelling – the move from "claret" and "Chablis" to cabernet and chardonnay that started in the '60s – has made wine much more accessible and easily understood.

But I wonder whether we've painted ourselves into a bit of a varietal corner. Single varietal wines have come to be seen as superior to blends – when blending grapes can often produce a wine that is greater than the sum of its

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parts. And our obsession with knowing exactly what's inside the bottle can hinder the winemakers' freedom to blend to a style using different grapes from one vintage to the next – especially in everyday-drinking wines at the commercial end of the market.

I realised just how varietally dependent I'd become when I tasted some new red wines recently, all great value (around \$16), and all delicious in their own way: Noon's 2008 Twelve Bells from McLaren Vale; Paulett's 2008 Stone Cutting from Clare; Larry Cherubino's 2007 Ad Hoc Mixmaster; and Peter Lehmann's 2008 Layers from the Barossa.

Once I'd tasted each wine, I naturally reached for the bottle and had a look at the label to find out what grapes were used to make them. And not one was able to enlighten me.

At first I was a bit annoyed and frustrated. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised this is a development that deserves to be encouraged. It didn't matter that I didn't know what the grapes were: all that mattered was that the wines were lovely drinks. It made me think that we should stop constantly fixating on varieties and start to value other aspects of wine such as style, regional-ity, vineyard character and our own pleasure.

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