



Thoughts on Bench Trials

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When dealing with tasks that are irreversible once complete ("Joe, go un-blend that tank over there, and when you're finished un-fine it and take out the sugar you added yesterday"), it's extremely useful to have a way to try things out without being stuck with the results. From acid and sweetness correction to fining, blending and of course copper, bench trials are an excellent way to see what might happen should you take a particular course of action vs. alternatives. There has to be a catch with any fool-proof solution, of course, and bench trials have a couple of them. First and foremost, they're kind of a hassle, and secondly, can you really trust that what you're seeing in the lab is what you'll see in the cellar? I think both of these problems have pretty much the same answer: if you're going to go through the process, you might as well do it as accurately as you can. A bench trial is only worthwhile if you believe in your methods and trust your results. Like school and piñatas, you get out of these things what you put into them.

Here are some suggestions and ideas for conducting bench trials. Every winery probably has a different idea about what is necessary, what is optional and what is strange. That's just fine.

Basics-

-Representative Sampling- as in probably not the very top or bottom of a tank. If using valves, make sure they're clean and/ or pour the first sample out and keep the next. If you're using a thief or a silicone tube, try get down a little from the top.

-Reasonable Simulation-try to match cellar conditions as much as possible. Consider temperatures and durations (i.e. how long does a fining agent need before it makes sense to rack off and taste?). If you are planning to filter at some point in the process, it might be worth lab-filtering your samples.

-Keep things clean and measure carefully. Find the seeds of doubt and weed them with the pointy trowel of good practices.

Considerations-

-Try a range of options-What's the result of 30 g/hL? Okay, how about 60, or 90 or 120? What happens when I blend in a third of this tank, or half or all of it? You already have everything out and set up anyway. You can try all sorts of things in a trial just to see (and taste) what happens. That's the beauty. No one has to be the wiser (besides the victims you snare with the old "try this. No, you have to guess.").



- Throw in an outlier. You may find it useful to add in treatments significantly higher or lower than the range you were planning on (obviously, be careful with copper and other things that might be toxic). Does it hurt? Does it help? What do you see? What do you smell and taste? You don't have to do this every time, but it can be really useful to see what too much, say, bentonite, is doing to the wine. This works especially well when you:

-Taste blind. You really want to have faith in your own trials? Teach yourself. Get some (clean) glasses out, find some round stickers for the bottom of the glasses (or however you want to do it), and do it the right way. Maybe you'll like the control (of course you have a control) and won't have to go through the hassle of whatever the process is you've just avoided. That's worth time, effort, materials, and the fact that you've saved the wine unnecessary stress. Now when you choose not to act you're not lazy; you're being efficient and savvy.

Further tips-

-De-gas if CO₂ is an issue .

-Use neutral containers and glasses. More often than not, "clean" glasses are also "smells like soap" glasses. Give them a rinse with the wine before tasting.

-Get more tasters. Cooking for two or more is always less of a burden, and we all have strengths and weaknesses. Call the owner, a colleague down the road, your spouse, or whomever you trust to give another opinion. They may confirm or assuage your fears. Either way, it helps.



Many of the items on this list are small annoyances that will make the process take longer. Balanced against that flare of annoyance is the flash of doubt from knowing that some part of the trial has been compromised and is not "telling the truth," as it were. My experience is that the annoyance is over as soon as the annoying thing is done, whereas the doubt tends to linger.

Every situation will not require every step, and every winemaker has his or her own idea of what needs to happen to make a trial believable. By all means, do what makes you comfortable. You are the one who needs to sleep well at night and look in the mirror in the morning.

This isn't rocket science--that's the point. In winemaking trials (and winemaking in general) there are always going to be variables that we just can't control. Why not take care of the things we can?

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