

THE WRITE STUFF

BLOGGERS ARE PLAYING AN INCREASING ROLE IN GROWING THE WINE INDUSTRY.

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LAST October the annual global Wine Media Conference (WMC) was held in the Hunter Valley. Formerly called the Wine Bloggers Conference, the WMC has been going for 12 years and this was the first time it was held outside of the US, thanks to some funding from Wine Australia (a very small part of the \$50 million invested by the government).

While not as well attended as previous conferences (due to the travel costs for the overseas attendees), conference participants came from the US, China, Japan, Europe as well as from around Australia. Unlike in Australia, where wine blogging is basically “a labour of love,” in the US wine blogging is a viable business, with many of the bloggers having 50,000 - 100,000 subscribers, and thereby wielding considerable influence on wine consumption.

On the Monday through Wednesday prior to the conference, the organisers put on an excursion for the overseas attendees to Queensland's Granite Belt wine region, with cooperation from the Queensland Wine Industry Association and Granite Belt Wine Tourism. Here visitors were shown/exposed to some of the new emerging varieties the Granite Belt is becoming famous for. This was interesting for the US visitors as Australia is significantly more adventurous in exploring the suitability of new varieties to its climate than the rest of the wine world.

The conference was organised by the US-based Zephyr Conferences organisation, in conjunction with Wine Communicators of Australia. Allan Wright, from the former, and Lynda Schenk, from the latter, opened the conference early on Thursday afternoon to welcome the attendees. This was followed directly by a presentation - Google's View of the Wine World, from Google Travel's Damien Ferreira Gomes, senior industry manager.

Gomes advised that in 2018 there were 20 million searches for wine in Australia and this is growing at the rate of 15 per cent a year. He spoke of four future identified trends in wine.

- **An increase in wine tourism in Australia:** Mainly from China, with China now having replaced New Zealand as the largest source of visitors to Australia. Based on current trends, by 2026 Australia will be seeing around 28 million tourists visiting each year. Other patterns are that Chinese and Indian tourists tend to stay in the major cities while European and American tourists tend to explore more and wander around the country. Needless to say, the Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) benefits were pushed quite hard as a way to increase online visibility. Other points from this presentation were that it is important to promote Australia's “clean and green” image with Asian visitors and the need to have a WeChat or other Chinese approved/functioning account as most western systems are locked out of China.
- **An increasing demand and interest in Organic wines:** The global interest in organic and biodynamic wines is steadily increasing. More so in organic wine than biodynamic wine, which is still misunderstood by a considerable proportion of wine drinkers.
- **Rosé is graduating to become a recreational drink rather than just a summer wine:** The “rise and rise” of rosé over the last few years shows no sign of abating, as wine drinkers shift from it being a summer wine through to it being a leisure and recreational drink. This trend is set to continue. Rosé hits on Google in Australia grew by 35 per cent last year to 500,000. At present the searches peak in spring and summer, but the spike is not as steep as it used to be and there is an increasing number of searches being done in autumn and winter.
- **Wine expectations and experiences vary significantly by generation:** Including the fact that innovation and Apps are key to attracting and holding on to the current 18-34-year-olds. For Gen Z, health is the most important issue and any positives/benefits should be highlighted.



The Friday morning sessions started with an introduction and overview of the Hunter Valley, which included its history and current developments such as the increasing use of technology and emerging varieties to adapt/cope with climate change. Particularly amusing was the Hunter saying in relation to emerging varieties: "If it has an 'O' in the name, give it a go." This applies to varieties such as fiano, vermentino, petit verdot, nebbiolo, sangiovese and especially tempranillo, of which a number of Hunter wineries have planted recently.

The next session was that of keynote speaker Colorado's, Bruce Schoenfeld, contributing writer to the *World of Fine Wine*, who has over 30-years of journalistic experience. His style is frank and informative, and his works have graced the pages of many of the most respected wine publications in the world. He spoke of how to create a lasting impression and how to cope with the current, rapidly changing environment so as to stay successful and develop as a wine journalist.

This was followed by a session on wine media in China. The initial presentation was about the wine industry in China, which is currently undergoing its third restructure this century, as importers significantly reduce stocks, and preferences see imports of Australian wine surpassing French wine for the first time. During this re-structure, six of the top 14 wine companies posted a loss in China.

Looking to the future, wine sales are expected to resume growing in 2020, but with 140,000 different wine brands having entered China so far in 2019, the growth will be sporadic and very much dependent on consumer demand rather than importer expectation, as happened previously. In effect, more but smaller orders for the brands that are successful in the retail market place.

Next in this session came an interesting presentation on social media in China, which showed that while there are 1.4 billion people in China, there are actually 1.5 billion mobile phone subscriptions, as some people

have two or more phones. There are 802 million internet users and a billion mobile social media users. Thereby demonstrating that mobile social media has outstripped the use of the internet in China. Active mobile social media users has been growing by around 10 per cent per year, which is a growth of about 95 million people a year. This clearly shows that for wineries it is more important to have a mobile social media platform than a website on the internet. Other interesting information from this session was that the median age in China is 38.7 years (lower than in western economies) and that the average literacy rate is 95 per cent of all people aged 15-years and over. Further, it was stated that 97 per cent of the population use a mobile device, whereas only 53 per cent use a lap top or desk top computer, with 95.4 per cent of active internet users using a mobile device, and 83 per cent of them using it at least daily. Sixty-one per cent of mobile users do banking online. The main implication of this is that only 18 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men have a credit card, whereas 48 per cent of women and 49 per cent of men purchase online. Thus online direct sales are significantly more important than credit card sales in China, with 74 per cent of mobile users reporting that they purchase online from their phone. As of January, 2019, the online spending on the category of "food and personal care," which includes wine, was \$46.25 billion a year and growing at around 19 per cent.

With western media platforms (Facebook, etc) not accessible in China, the most used Chinese platform is WeChat, with 79 per cent of mobile users using this platform. This is followed by Baidu Tieba at 72 per cent, QQ (68 per cent), Sina Weibo (60 per cent), Youku (59 per cent) and then QZone, Tencent Weibo and Tudou with 30 per cent.

This presentation was followed by a tasting of Groupe Pernod Ricard wines from around the world. It included wines made from grapes grown on unique terroirs from France, New Zealand, Spain, America and Australia.

Trish Barry then presented a session, The importance of Digital Marketing



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and Why We Are All Doing it Wrong. It was a guide to effective digital marketing, how the scene is constantly changing, the setting of realistic goals, strategies and tools to implement these and how to analyse the results. It included advice that, “it is more important to make a big impact on a smaller number of people, than a small impact on a large number of people.” There were plenty of other helpful hints as well suggestions as to what tools to use to establish your program and to monitor that you are on the right path.

The message was to build a strong website focused on building traffic, with optimised content, and then constantly change/upgrade it so that people keep coming back to see what’s new. That is, “curiosity is the key”. Therefore, keep on testing and trialling new things and use tools like Google analytics to measure their effectiveness.

The last session of the afternoon was a concept that was new to me, “speed wine dating” or as they called it “live wine social”. We sat at tables of eight and a winemaker would approach and have five minutes in which to pour one of their red wines and talk about them, while his/her audience posted live to social media (mainly Twitter), then they would go to another table and be replaced by a new winemaker. There were 19 wineries from around Australia involved and it was interesting to see the level of preparedness of the different wineries, with some of the smallest being the best prepared with tasting hand-outs for their audience and other props such as samples of their soils, whereas most of the larger companies arrived at the table with just their bottle of wine.

The action continued on the Saturday morning, with the choice of attending one of the two sessions being run concurrently. I chose to attend the Online Versus Print Wine Writers session where panellists Josh Martin,

from *Gourmet Traveller Magazine (GTM)*, Liz Barrett, from *What’s in that Bottle* and Christina Tulloch, from Tulloch Wines, discussed the differences and similarities of writing for print or online audiences. Martin provided statistics for GMT in print and online, where the print skew was 80 per cent male to 20 per cent female, whereas online the skew is 56 per cent female to 44 per cent male. Women tend to prefer digital media as they are able to “consume it in bite size chunks” as and when their busy lives allows them to do so. In her presentation, Martin explained the difference in blogging between Australia and the US, where it is significantly more prominent and important, and is a viable income source for the better operators. The concept of “style over substance” was discussed and we were advised that most consumers don’t really care about new releases, unless it is of their very favourite wine. Tulloch put a winery’s perspective on the topic, which neatly wrapped up the discussion.

The next session - Increase your online following - and was presented by Polly Hammond, from 5forests, a digital marketing change agency. This session looked at the situation from the other side of the fence - the consumer and how we can entice them on board by standing for something, showing empathy, being confident and self-assured, and most importantly constantly changing tactics to avoid boredom and to exceed expectations.

The wines served with lunch were from Pernod Ricard, including a couple of delicious reds from its St Hugo Range.

Lightning Talks was the final session, where six fellow attendees presented a five-minute talk on what they do in the industry or a future vision for it. They had 20 slides prepared which were loaded into a specifically timed sequence so that the speaker had to match their talk to the changing



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slides. This is an interesting concept which certainly keeps the speakers on their time schedule and works extremely well. The first of the speakers was Dr Richard Baxter, whose book *Wine & Health*, is just about to be released. It is a detailed history of wine and medicine in Australia and the 180 doctors who have established vineyards, including Dr Max Lake, who is credited with starting the boutique winery phenomena in Australia when he set up Lakes Folly in the Hunter Valley during the mid-1960s.

Steve Noel was next and he spoke on the need for humour in wine and on how music affects wine decisions. Other speakers covered matters such

as a keyboard-free future happening very soon, SEO's (Search Engine Optimisation), relevant hash tags, the fact that 10 per cent of users already buy via the Voice Assistant App. As well as the fact that while 80 per cent of people who visit a website read the headlines, only 20 per cent read through to the end of the article, so it has to be gripping to get them to read all the way through.

During the closing comments, conference supremo Allan Wright, of Zephyr Conferences, announced that the 2020 Conference will be held in Eugene, Oregon, in the US. 

