



Here comes Lagrein again

Dan Traucki revisited Lagrein after first writing about it in WBM six years ago. He liked what he tasted.

WORDS DAN TRAUCKI

During a recent meeting of the Blackwood Winemakers and Brewers Club, a friend opened a bottle of Hand Crafted by Geoff Hardy Lagrein 2012 and it was divine – so silky smooth and elegant, having lost its youthful aggressiveness, yet with plenty of life in front of it. It was that wine that led me to write this article as it has been six years since I first wrote about Lagrein.

Lagrein is the exciting native Italian red variety that originates from the cool climate Trentino-Alto Adige area of northern Italy. It was first mentioned in dispatches in the records of an Abbey, in the Lagarina Valley of Trentino, not far from the city of Bolzano back in the 17th century.

Until fairly recently, Lagrein had not really strayed away from home, but lately it has started gaining favour in Australia with a smattering of wines also appearing in New Zealand and the USA. There are small plantings of Lagrein in the Central Coast region of California, used mainly for blending with Shiraz (Syrah) and Durif (Petit Syrah) with only one or two straight varietal wines made so far. In Oregon there are some very small plantings in the Willamette Valley and Umpqua Valley, where it is showing great promise.

Since I first wrote about Lagrein in 2013 there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of wineries growing the variety in Australia. It is now up to 40, spread from the Granite Belt up north, to Tassie down south, then across from Alpine Victoria in the east and over to its main abode, South Australia.

Half of all the Aussie growers are scattered across SA, with every region (other than Kangaroo Island) having at least one Lagrein grower.

Lagrein will go feral with vegetative growth if left to its own devices. It requires good vineyard practices to avoid significant overcropping leading to thin, green, massively tannic and acidic wines. In a similar way to Grenache, if you give it too much water (less likely to happen in these days of drought) it will produce thin lolly-water-like wine that is really unfit for bottling.

However, with lots of proper attention and TLC in the vineyard, Lagrein produces gorgeous, deeply coloured, low pH wine that is tannic, high acid and divinely flavoured.

As a straight varietal wine, ripe Lagrein exhibits beautiful earthy, dark cherry, plummy flavours with dark chocolate and even the occasional hint of liquorice, a mineral edge and floral acidity. It is full bodied without being heavy. This makes it a fabulous food wine, especially for richer, heartier dishes where the wine's acidity and higher tannins help to cut through the richness or oiliness of the dish.

When grown in its traditional cooler climate areas Lagrein produces a fairly sharp, high acidity young wine that needs a reasonable amount of time to soften off and become svelte enough to be consumed without rich food. When grown in warmer climes such as the Barossa and Riverland it makes a much more approachable young wine.

It is still too early in the evolution of this variety in Australia to tell how well these

warmer climate wines will keep. However, given that we live in a 'now' society focused on instant gratification, where very few of us actually cellar wines for mature drinking, longevity is unlikely to be an issue. Especially given the greater approachability of these young warmer climate Lagrein.

A splash of Lagrein in a blend can certainly enhance a lighter coloured or low acid red wine, while a big, more rustic Lagrein wine can be lightened up or softened by the judicious addition of a softer, less powerful variety.

Last year world-renowned grape geneticist and co-author of *Wine Grapes* (the bible) with Jancis Robinson, Dr José Vouillamoz, selected 10 "potentially globally important" grape varieties to succeed/look out for in the near future. Among them he selected two Italian varieties, one of which was Lagrein, because of its fresh acidity and deep colour.

To get as broad a cross-section of the wines made in Australia from the variety as possible, I asked winemakers around the country for a sample bottle. The worthy wines tasted included the following.

McLaren Vale

- Conte Estate Lacrima di Terra (earth's tear) Sparkling Lagrein 2014 (no added preservatives). Closer to being a spritzig wine than a full-blown sparkling, it is elegant, subtle and very drinkable. Only the second Sparkling Lagrein I have ever tasted or heard of, the first being the Sparkling Lagrein of Hartzbarn at Moculta in the Barossa, which unfortunately is no longer being made.
- Serafino Lagrein 2017. An interesting wine

but a bit light-on in the Lagrein varietal definition department. One judge suggested it was possibly made in a Shiraz style rather than as a Lagrein. Nevertheless a great red wine.

Mudgee

- Di Lusso Estate Lagrein 2010 and 2018. The 2018 shows great potential for future development but currently has rather high acidity subduing the delightful fruit. Needs time to soften off or to be consumed now with very rich food, which will ameliorate the acidity. The potential was borne out by the 2010 vintage which at eight years older still has amazingly youthful colour, is developing lovely bottle age complexity and is smooth and rounded. The acidity has faded and this is now a superb, luscious wine that can truly be enjoyed on its own.

Orange

- Cargo Road Lagrein 2018. The coolest wine of the tasting, with the vineyard being on the slopes of Mt Canobolas at 860 metres above sea level, this wine is massively deep in colour, has a big, blowsy bouquet and mountains (pardon the pun) of stewed plummy flavours, well balanced and integrated, but high in acidity. This will become a stellar wine in three to five years as the acidity softens off and it rounds out.

Macedon Ranges

- Gisborne Peak Lagrein 2015. At four years old this current release reflects the fact that in cooler climates the variety needs time for the acidity to settle down. An excellent wine and the most Italian in style out of the whole tasting. Lighter (comparatively) in colour and body, it is very elegant with considerable but not over-the-top acidity. Can accompany much lighter food dishes than most of its compatriots.

Langhorne Creek

- Hofer Wines Lagrein 2016 and 2017. Complexing as it ages with hints of nuttiness and meatiness, great silky flavours and gradually receding acidity. Both are an excellent example of what Lagrein is capable of achieving here with just a smidge of patience. Give them another year or two and they will be even more delightful.

- Bremerton Lagrein 2016. A sensational Aussie expression. Has all the best attributes without any of the searing acidity. Superbly crafted, smooth, rich and perfectly rounded.
- Next Crop Lagrein 2017. Very drinkable now but will be a smasher in one to two years as the acidity softens off. It will be worth the wait.
- Heartland Sposa e Sposa Lagrein Dolcetto 2014 and 2016. An excellent blend with the Dolcetto softening off the impact of the Lagrein acidity, making it more approachable to enjoy at a younger age. Very classy. The 2014 highlights how well this combination works as it is spot-on for drinking now.
- Heartland Foreign Correspondent Dolcetto Lagrein 2018. While this is a really good wine it is slightly out of context with the Lagrein tasting as it is light and bright, more akin to a Pinot Noir on steroids than a chunky, meaty Lagrein. Excellent to enjoy now while waiting for your Lagrein to mature and soften off.
- Heartland Dolcetto Lagrein 2013. At six years old this wine has just hit its straps and is truly outstanding, demonstrating the virtues of patience with the acidic Italian red varieties.

The Langhorne Creek wines amply demonstrate the suitability of the region for making great Lagrein.

Limestone Coast

- Wangolina Lagrein 2018. You could consider this wine as a crossover between the cooler climate wines and the warmer climate wines. It is deeply coloured, has a slightly softer bouquet with a hint of spice, and a smooth, quite round palate but with still fairly high acidity on the finish. This will blossom into an excellent wine a bit sooner than the cooler climate wines, but still needs a bit of time.

Limestone Coast/Adelaide Hills

- Hand Crafted by Geoff Hardy Limestone Coast/Adelaide Hills Lagrein 2017. The only multi-area wine in the line-up. It works really well, being smooth, rich, beautifully balanced and shaping up to be every bit as great as its 2012 predecessor that inspired this article. Very classy.

Barossa

- Dell'uva Lagrein 2015. The lone Barossan is from Mediterranean specialist Dell'uva which grows 38 different Mediterranean varieties. This wine has subtle oak aromas, beautiful rich, rounded, perfumed flavours with a hint of fruit sweetness on the front palate, leading to a dry finish. Eminently drinkable right now.

The Riverland

- Samu Lagrein 2016 and 2018. Massively deep in colour, rich, full, well rounded body and more approachable than the young Lagrein from other regions due to lower (but still considerable) acidity. This also shows how the style of the wine is developing, with the 2016 being slightly portier in style while the 2018 is considerably more elegant and sophisticated.
- Alex Russell Alejandro Lagrein 2017 and 2018. The 2017 demonstrates how even a short amount of time aids in the development of this variety, with this wine being slightly more complex, including some lovely green olive aromas on the bouquet and is slightly more developed than its younger sibling. The 2018 is outstanding, almost black in colour, big flavours of plums, rich, round with excellent balance and just the right amount of acidity on the finish. The most approachable/drink now (on its own) wine of the tasting.

Finally, as a comparison to the real deal we tried Alois Lageder Alto Adigio Lagrein 2008. At 11 years old this wine was brilliant. It has a gentle bouquet with soft, well rounded flavours, loads of delightful deliciousness – superb. This is what I believe most Aussie Lagrein from our cooler climates will be like when they are five to eight years old. Perfectly divine and a sheer joy to drink.

As with a number of other emerging varieties, Australia is now producing some ripping examples of Lagrein, not by copying the wines from the grape's original home country, but rather by making an excellent Australian expression. ♦

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