

THE EMERGENCE of EMERGING VARIETIES

Words by Dan Traucki



Way back in the late 1970s [for those who can remember that far back], Australian wine drinkers drank Rhine Riesling, Chablis, White Burgundy and probably the occasional Lime, Lemon & Hock in white wines and either Claret or Burgundy in reds, along with a still large amount of Sherry and Port. Then Tyrell's launched its Vat 47 Hunter Chardonnay as part of the start of an avalanche, of the varietally naming of wine, to the extent that almost every Australian wine, and a growing proportion of global wine is today varietally labelled. I specifically mention the Tyrell's Vat 47 because it was also the real launch of an emerging white grape variety called, Chardonnay, that up until then almost nobody had heard of. Within ten to fifteen years Chardonnay would become the King of White varieties and outsell all the other white varieties combined. This phenomena was followed by that of Sauvignon Blanc which would eventually usurp Chardonnay from the throne.

Fast forward to today and you can see that here in Australia we have gone from one or two emerging grape varieties to currently around 100 to 120 out of the 154 different grape varieties we grow. I am not suggesting that any of the current "emergers" will repeat the success of Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc, but rather that they will form an important part in our expanding and diversifying wine industry, and some of them will end up helping the Australian wine industry to survive and thrive in global warming.

The widely accepted definition of an "emerging" variety is that it is one of the 1,168 winemaking grape varieties [as defined in "Wine Grapes" the book by Jancis Robinson et al], which has not been normally grown in that country and is not one of the varieties considered to be the "classic" varieties, such as Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Cabernet, Shiraz and Merlot, etc. So that for example, Sangiovese, which is widely grown in Italy, is an emerging variety in Australia because it is a relative newcomer here.

The significance of emergers is highlighted by the fact that just over fifty percent of Australia's 2,500 wineries now produce one or more wines which includes an emerging variety.

Whilst the emerging vines planted here include varieties from most of the wine world, from Georgia, Turkey, right through to Japan, the vast majority are Mediterranean varieties from Spain, Italy, Greece, and Southern France, because not only do they produce good to great wine in their native land, but being Mediterranean they tolerate higher heat and are more drought tolerant than the "Classic", mainly French varieties which come from cooler, wetter regions than what we have here.

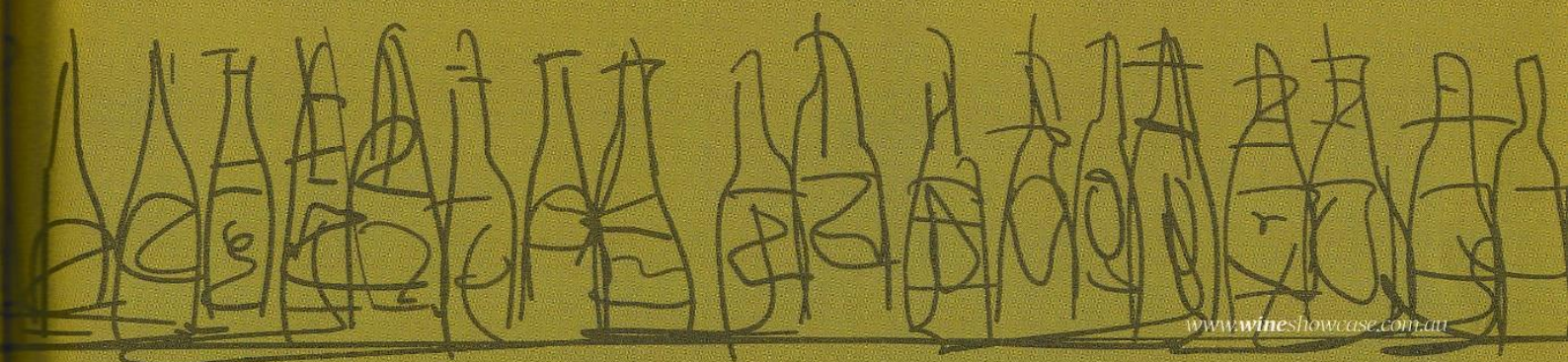
So which are the varieties to keep an eye out for right now? In my opinion the standout star in the white wines is the Austrian native Grüner Veltliner which

is going "gangbusters" in the Adelaide Hills. So much so that with around 40 growers [there was only one back in 2010] the Adelaide Hills has the largest plantings of Grüner outside of Eastern Europe. It tastes like a great Riesling but with a bit more oomph and character.

Grüner is followed by [not necessarily in order] the exciting Italians Fiano and Vermentino, and the fabulous Frenchmen Marsanne, Pinot Blanc and Savagnin. Then there are the seductive Spaniards Verdejo and Albarino, the Portuguese Arinto and Verdelho, then finally the gorgeous Greek Assyrtico. Yes, there are many other emerging whites being grown here, such as the French oyster perfect, Picpoul [currently two growers], but those I mentioned above are, in my opinion, the ones most likely to become widely known and accepted by wine consumers over the next decade or so.

In the reds, the list is much, much longer and probably more exciting. Here there is one significant stand out, being the Spanish Tempranillo, which has really blossomed to the extent that there are now over 400 wineries producing the variety, which for me means that it has become mainstream and is no longer emerging.

Kicking off with the lighter-bodied/styled wines we have the uber exciting native Austrian Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch [hard to say but easy to drink], the



THE EMERGENCE of

French Gamay and Alicante Bouchet all of which can give Pinot Noir a run for its money.

In the medium-bodied emergers we have a plethora of Italians with their characteristic higher acid/tannic finish, which makes them great food wines. These include Aglianico, Nero d'Avola, Sangiovese, Nebbiolo Montepulciano, Teroldego, Barbera and Dolcetto, and my favourite Italian, Lagrein. Then come the Iberians (Spanish and Portuguese) varieties such as Graciano, Touriga Nacional, Monastrell (aka Mourvèdre or Mataro) the rare but sublime Mencia, Trincadeira, Tinta Barroca, Tinta Cao and Bobal. France is ably represented by the svelte Carménère, the sensational Cabernet Franc, Cinsaut, Malbec and the excellent, Petit Verdot.

No Greeks so far although I hear that there are Xinomavro cuttings in quarantine as we speak and hey, we even have a super rare Turkish variety, Boğazkere, here.

In the heavyweight division we have a few really smashing characters, for those drinkers who like "a liquid steak in every glass", starting with one of my all-time favourites, Durif. The world's first ever varietally labelled Durif wine was launched by Morris Wines in Rutherglen, in 1954. These wines live incredibly well, as a couple of 50-year-

old Durif I have fawned over prove. By the way, the Yanks call it Petit Syrah!

Other potential superstars include Georgia's wunderkind, Saperavi, a recent arrival here which has been kicking goals for nearly 6,000 years, France's monumental, Tannat, and the USA's super-duper, Zinfandel.

So apart from rattling off the names of some newer and exciting grape varieties, what does this all mean? As our country heats up, it will be harder and harder to produce top quality "classical" varieties in some/many existing regions, thus in order for the industry to survive and thrive, producers will either need to locate to cooler areas (not easy to do) or move to growing more temperature and drought resistant varieties.

I can remember in my early days in the wine industry thirty odd years ago, sampling Barossa Pinot Noir wines which were good "dry red" wines but not true varietal Pinot Noir. As far as I know nobody grows Pinot Noir in the Barossa anymore. Over time the warmer areas such as the Riverland, Sunraysia and Riverina will become too warm to produce truly varietal Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, etc. This is why the more experimentation (if there is such a word) wineries in these regions have been working, mainly with Mediterranean varieties,

to create exciting new wines which are significantly more global warming-proof than the existing classic varieties.

Take the Riverland as an example, it is gradually transforming from being a mass producer of commercial quality wines into a region that has a growing number of small, premium producers that are making exceptionally good emerging varietal wines such as the whites, Arinto, Verdejo and Vermentino, and in the reds, Durif, Petit Verdot, Saperavi, Nero d'Avola, Tinta Barocca, Lagrein and even the just introduced Spanish, Prieto Picudo.

Thus I suggest, nay urge you to "step away" from just drinking just Sav Blanc, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Merlot and spread your vinous wings by trying some of the 100+ emerging varieties that our very capable winemakers are turning into cracking wines. The array of choice is almost mind-blowing, from the light-bodied, through to the medium-bodied and right up to the heavy-duty bodybuilders. There is a wine style out there to suit your particular palate and think of the adventure in finding it.

You won't like them all but along the way you will find a few that you really enjoy and in the process you will be helping to secure the future of the Australian wine industry.

EMERGING VARIETIES

