



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

GIVING SHIRAZ A SHAKE-UP

SHIRAZ is being shaken up. The old and somewhat tired approach to Australian shiraz is being questioned and there is a trend towards upsetting the norm. Winemakers are making decisions behind boardroom doors, or more likely out in the back “lean-to” that they cannot break through the saturated market with your standard recipe shiraz. There are simply too many of them on the shelf and it doesn’t catch the eye of that enigmatic creature- the sommelier. So the script is being thrown out.

When I say old approach I’m talking about full-bodied, high alcohol wines with lashings of ripe fruit matched with similar levels of new barrique oak. It’s being replaced by elegant shiraz, matured in large format, older oak barrels, and definitely has no excessive alcohol. Rich aromas of chocolate, vanilla and black fruits are being replaced with the smell and taste of pepper and spice which is distinctively present and not just read about on the back label. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t mind fruit, that is what Australian wine is all about, but I want complexity as well. Incidentally, if a winery is going to charge premium prices then it has to be worth it and should deliver BLIC – balance, length, intensity and complexity. Often when looking through a range of wines I end up liking the middle-priced wine and not the premium one because it is more elegant and well balanced. This new breed and approach to shiraz is springing up in some surprising places.

Tasmanian shiraz, no, that is not a typo, is a good example. Traditionally, Tasmania was regarded as too cold for shiraz, and in some sites that might still be true; but it is on the rise. You can put the growth down to global warming or moving with the times, but now producers are adding it to their portfolio. If I was planting a vineyard in Tasmania now I’d seriously consider planting shiraz. You can trace the increase back to 2011 when Nick Glaetzer won the Jimmy Watson Trophy at the Royal Melbourne Wine Show with his 2010 Mon Pere Shiraz made from Coal River Valley fruit.

Moorilla Estate has some of the oldest planting of shiraz in Tasmania from the early 1990’s. Its 2014 Muse Syrah displays all the hallmarks of a cool-climate wine. It has vibrant white pepper aromas, with medium acid (something not to be overlooked in a red) and a medium-bodied palate. But the most exciting wine I recently tried in Tasmania was a barrel sample from Freycinet vineyard of its 2013 shiraz. It was juicy, with vibrant black cherry fruit as well as black pepper spice and is destined to be an outstanding wine when it is finally released. Winemaker Claudio Radenti purchased a neighbour’s vineyard in 2013, which has a tiny 0.2ha plot of shiraz planted around the ’90s. Quantities are tiny but there is more to come. “On the strength of these initial shiraz wines we have planted an extra 1000 vines,” comments Radenti.

*If I was planting a vineyard
in Tasmania now I’d seriously
consider planting shiraz.*

Now let’s go back to the future. I’m reliably told by Thommo (AKA winemaker Andrew Thomas), that Murray Tyrrell traditionally co-fermented trebbiano with shiraz in the 1960s. Trebbiano was grown for the fortified trade that was the backbone of the industry in the 19th and 20th centuries, and up to the 1970s. Trebbiano was in the past called white shiraz as well as white hermitage and in Italy it was blended with sangiovese in chianti. “In those days they didn’t have bags of tartaric acid handy so it was a way of boosting the acidity in a warm vintage,” comments Thomas. Thomas, who is about to open his first ever cellar door, couldn’t get hold of Hunter trebbiano so in making a traditional Hunter red of by-gone years he has used semillon verjuice to make his DJV Shiraz (deja vu). He has been making the style since 2007

and it compliments his range of stylistic and single vineyard Hunter shiraz. Choosing the shiraz fruit was also critical in this pinot-like, medium-bodied red. He first used fruit sourced from the old Ben Ean vineyard but when Fosters (now Treasury Wine Estates) refused to sell it to him he turned to a small 0.2ha block in the Trevena vineyard. Positioned next to the famous HVD and Braemore vineyards it is rare to find a block of shiraz planted on sandy alluvial soils, these are normally reserved for semillon. “The nature of the soils has given us a prettier, lighter style,” reflects Thomas, which is out of step to most Hunter shiraz, perhaps the wine should be called vive la difference rather than deja vu! We looked at 2009, 2011 and 2013 vintages and you see the evolution of the style and how the vineyard selection, as well as the amount of verjuice, has made the wine lighter and lighter as vintages go by.

Staying in the Hunter, a shiraz pinot blend is not what you would expect to find in a hot region in Australia. This blend would normally get my back up, to say the least. I find some shiraz cabernet hard work as a blend, but this? However, Mount Pleasant Mount Henry 2011, a blend of 52 per cent shiraz and 48 per cent pinot noir, works. The pinot noir comes from the historic front block at the winery and is only used in good years. The wine is meaty and savoury, with a lick of red cherry. It is medium bodied, with a savoury palate and well-balanced acid with a slightly tannic finish. The clone that is planted is MV5 and was planted in 1922, the year legendary winemaker Maurice O’Shea bought what was to become Mount Pleasant. Known as the workhorse variety for Australian pinot this could be the mother plant and Australia’s first original pinot plantings. I’ve not heard about older ones, and does the MV stand for Mount View? Makes sense. Former Mount Pleasant winemaker Gwyn Olsen, now at Briar Ridge, does the same with her HRB Shiraz Pinot Noir. HRB denoting the old name given to these wines - Hunter River Burgundy.