



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

## SPARKLING FUTURE FOR RED FIZZ

THERE is a cringe factor when you broach the subject of sparkling red wine. Nobody knows if they are supposed to like it or not. It's fizzy, strange, chilled (even stranger) and to cap it all, it can be sweet! No wonder that it's best described as a left-field wine that rarely comes out from the cellar.

However, historically speaking, Australia's love affair with red fizz dates back a long way, and is in good company. We got the idea from the French and if you look back at old newspapers from the 1830s to 1870s there are literally thousands of advertisements for sparkling burgundy. It all came from France and was a well-accepted style of wine. No wonder we started making our own versions.

According to research done by John Wilson the first records appear of a home-grown sparkling burgundy in 1881, but the origin of the grapes is unknown. On firmer grounds were the shiraz sparkling wines made at Auldana winery, just outside of Adelaide, in 1888. Hans Irvine at Seppelts Great Western started making sparkling burgundy and exhibiting wine in 1894 and many more followed after that. Colin Preece, between 1930 and 1960, was another legendary Seppelts winemaker who cemented Seppelts Great Western as the home of Australian sparkling red burgundy. In 1973 Preece was described by Len Evens as "one of the greatest Australian winemakers of this century". But as the century closed the fashion died out for sparkling red, until we are now left with a small band of dedicated producers centred on country Victoria and South Australia. In the last 50 years it's had a bad rap and suffered from mass produced, low quality imports such as Lambrusco and Cold Duck flooding the country. But we are past that now and the style is on the up.

Seppelts Great Western has had such an impact in the region (and it is a shame to see the fate of the historic winery lies in the balance as I write). Take for example Tom Guthrie, owner of Grampians Estate: "In the late '80s I decided to diversify my family sheep business and enter the wine industry by planting a small 4-acre vineyard. It was around that time that I got to know several Seppelts employees and winemakers, and it's likely that the likes of Ian Shepherd introduced me to this wonderful style and impressed upon me Seppelts part in the

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history of sparkling shiraz in Australia."

Like all wines, the source of the fruit for sparkling wine is critical. Quality grapes mean ripe grapes, but this often brings higher alcohol levels. The problem is that sparkling wines only need a modest level of alcohol. Guthrie explains the balancing act: "Some of our best fruit goes into making our Rutherford Sparkling Shiraz. The 2016 vintage was extremely early, with alcohol levels way ahead of flavour, hence winemakers picking at unusually high sugar levels to get the desired flavours. This year we have the very difficult scenario of wines coming in with very high alcohol levels leaving few batches with the desired 13 per cent alcohol level for a successful secondary fermentation."

So ripe grapes are needed to make into a base wine, but the winemaker has to be

careful to avoid too much tannin pick-up as carbon dioxide in the final wine will accentuate any formidable tannin structure. Morris of Rutherglen has been making its Sparkling Shiraz Durif since 1990. Fifth-generation winemaker David Morris says they select older vine material for their sparkling red. "Ours is shiraz dominant, but durif adds lovely richness and colour, but we have to be careful it doesn't give us too much tannin," David comments. "We leave the wine in some older oak to mature and allow the air to work on the wine and polymerise the tannins, liqueuring at the end of the process also helps."

The secondary fermentation occurs in bottle by the action of added sugar and yeast which takes around three weeks. What surprises me is that red wine still benefits from yeast autolysis. It's not as though you can smell any bread dough or yeasty characters when you have all that ripe fruit. Morris explains that the yeasts gives the wine a creaminess on the palate and in fact they leave it longer on lees than other sparkling wines. Usually the wine sits on lees for a minimum of nine months, but some go as long as eight or 10 years. Like champagne they stay fresh while in contact with the lees.

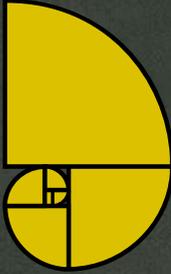
Producers choose between transfer and traditional methods. The latter means the wine undergoes the process of remuage and disgorgement followed by the topping up (dosage liqueur). "We use a little bit of vintage port sometimes," confesses Morris. This is the point at which the final sweetness of the wine can be determined and the average sweetness level is approximately 25g/l. Transfer method does away with the process of remuage and disgorgement, and simply pumps the wine out and filters the yeast lees then returns the wine to a clean bottle.

Morris Shiraz Durif is a non-vintage style and Morris thinks this has its advantages. "We are holding around 10 years of back vintages and being able to add these old wines to the blend produces softness, whilst the youngest components, normally around two years old, gives it freshness and fruit aromas," he says.

Grampians Estates Rutherford Sparkling Shiraz is a vintage style and into its 12th year. The secondary fermentation is done at Blue Pyrenees Estate under the guidance of winemaker Andrew Koerner. "As experienced and successful sparkling winemakers, he and his team have guided me in getting the right liqueuring rates to produce a style which is balanced and not overly sweet," comments Guthrie. He goes on to add a valid point about the time it takes to produce this style. "The base wine takes one year and then we like to keep the wine on lees for three to four years to add complexity and richness. Accountants don't like these sorts of figures."

Sparkling reds go with rich foods such as aromatic duck, especially Asian-inspired dishes. It has also developed an affinity with roast turkey on a Christmas Day. Guthrie suggests trying it with chocolate desert and fresh raspberries. It's an all-round product as the wine has a legendary ageing capacity that can stretch beyond 20 years.

Wine is an endearing subject because it involves learning about's stories and lives. You can tell Guthrie and his wife Sarah are passionate about their Rutherford Sparkling Shiraz and, sadly, that took a deeper personal note when their son Thomas Rutherford (called Ford) was tragically killed in a car accident, aged just 17, on Australia Day this year. This wine will now be a tribute to Ford. 🍷



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