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## TASTE OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

DURING a wine course in Italy some years ago a quote from Giuseppe Martelli, Italian Association of Enologists director, made me think about what was happening to the world of wine. It is worth sharing a translation with you. "Predictably the substitution of traditional varieties with a few species of vine and the standardisation of production techniques both in the vineyard and in the cellar are likely to lead to a sort of homogenisation of the 'taste for wine': this is effectively a leveling out albeit at a high qualitative level. Consequently there is a risk that one factor that gives the global enological scene its great richness, one of the reasons for its fascination, could well be lost - the diversity, which is the expression of the history and of the material culture of each region."

Reading between the lines, what Martelli was inferring is that wine could possibly become boring, restricted to a handful of varieties, predictable, but reliable. It was also a plug for the 360 officially registered Italian grape varieties and perhaps a snub to the French "classic" varieties that have covered the globe. Winemaking skills have advanced so far that wines are made to a recipe in a sterile environment which produces the same tasting wine irrespective of the source of the grapes. Some use the term industrial winemaking. If we, the consumers, don't make the effort to try something different then eventually the selection of wine will decrease. It's simple market economics.

There is plenty to choose from and with Australia producing around 150 different varieties you don't necessarily have to choose an import. What's more, why not try a blend? Here, there is some truth in the old adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, so why drink only a "part"? Here are a few suggestions: Try or retry Rioja and the wines of Ribera Del Duero. Both are based on the underrated tempranillo grape, the former a blend incorporating garnacha and graciano. Rioja, in northern Spain, is divided into three regions moving roughly west to east. Tempranillo is found in the

Atlantic influenced Alta and Alavesa, whilst garnacha needs the warmth of Baja that has a warmer, slight Mediterranean climate. There are a number of styles to choose, including joven (young and often unoaked), crianza (aged for up to two years), reserva (three years) and gran reserva (five years). Try Roda or artadi for what a modern Rioja should be like. Ribera Del Duero is slightly south of Rioja and an extremely chilly part of highland Spain known as the Meseta Central and can suffer frost in both May and October.

If you want to stick to home-grown wines, but experimenting in blends, then the Barossa Valley is experiencing a resurgence of GSMs (grenache, shiraz, mataro). The warmth of the valley suits this style and the wines are elegant with sweet red fruits, some white pepper and are between medium and full bodied in

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weight, but definitely not as overpowering as the typical Barossa shiraz. Rockford Moppa Springs, Teusner Joshua, Spinifex Miette and John Duval Plexus are all excellent, well-priced examples. The white Marsanne Roussanne blends are a perfect alternatives to these wines. Yerringberg from the Yarra Valley makes an exceptional example.

Moving to Italy, Valpolicella in the North-East region of Veneto is another blended wine. Made from three grapes: corvina, rondinella and small amounts of molinara. Valpolicella makes five different styles of wines. In its simplest form it can be a cheap, fruity, light wine that is delicious young and suits a slice of pizza; at the other extreme you find the dry, concentrated Amarone style that is internationally renowned.

To make an Amarone wine the grapes were traditionally dried in the well ventilated loft of a winery for up to 120 days after picking. However these days most producers use temperature and humidity controlled rooms for the drying process. During this time

the grapes lose about 30 to 40 per cent of their original weight. The resulting wine is powerful stuff, what the Italians call "vino da meditazione" - meditation wine.

Ripasso, a reasonably-priced style, takes the already used Amarone skins to beef-up normal Valpolicella wine which increases the alcohol only slightly, due to a re-fermentation that occurs. It is a delightful style with fresh cherry aromatics and a good textured palate, much lighter than Amarone. Finally the traditional Recioto style, is a rich and intensely sweet red wine, better served at the end of a meal.

Australian examples are thin on the ground. A number of producers such as Primo Estate and Hobbs make Amarone styles from the "classic" varieties. But the closest to Valpolicella is made by Freeman Vineyards.

In the Hilltops region of New South Wales Dr Brian Freeman planted a rondinella and corvina vineyard in 1999. Dr Freeman uses a solar powered prune dehydrator and places a proportion of the grapes on racks for three days at 40C. Freeman Secco Rondinella Corvina is a lovely elegant, medium-bodied savoury wine with dried cherries, earthy and undergrowth notes.

Other single variety wines worth exploring include: gruner veltliner and blaufrankisch (try Hahndorf Hill), vermentino (RVIC-Riverland Vine Improvement Committee) and nebbiolo (Grove Estate).

Has the threat of homogenised wine been averted? Looking on the retail shelves in 2013 you can get overwhelmed by the amount of sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, cabernet and shiraz bottles for sale. But the "other" varieties, blends and winemaking alternatives such as the organic, biodynamic and natural wines are also there. So, yes, we have avoided homogenisation, as long as wine drinkers experiment and do not take the easy option.