



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

DAZZLED BY GRENACHE

RECENTLY I've come to appreciate grenache. This came as a bit of a surprise, as I'd always regarded it as a second tier grape variety compared to the likes of pinot noir, shiraz and cabernet sauvignon. It has been a gradual awareness as I found myself confronted with it in a number of different formats. I feel it has been stalking me.

But that is the beauty of grenache; it comes in all sorts of disguises. While it can be a supporting act with shiraz or tempranillo, you can also get seriously concentrated mono-varietal wines from ancient bush vines, or drink it as a light rosé or a sumptuously sweet dessert wine in the vin doux naturel style. It could literally see you right through a meal.

At one point the world's second most planted grape variety, grenache is not without its problems. In the vineyard it is readily attacked by the light brown apple moth and the vines are suckers for phomopsis. The thin skins produce a lightly coloured wine, especially if the vines are irrigated too liberally. The resulting wines can oxidise earlier than other varieties. On the flip-side grenache is a drought resistant variety that buds early and ripens late, so demands a good old, long, Australian summer.

In Europe the grape came to prominence in the Aragon Kingdom in Spain and moved north and east. In France it is an important grape variety in the vast Languedoc-Roussillon region and in the Rhone Valley. It is also found on the island of Sardinia where it is known locally as cannonau.

Cotes du Rhone is where grenache is chiefly planted and the styles of wines are immense. Often blended 50/50 with syrah we are seeing attractive, medium-bodied, red fruit-driven wines that are glug-able and well made from this vast appellation. Simply go out and buy Etienne Guigal's sub \$20 offering to see what I mean. At a higher price point

the wines of Chateauneuf du Pape are renowned for their complexity. Grown on its famous Galet (pebble) soils, it offers more complex rustic notes, leather, pepper spice and the hand of oak comes to the fore. Rosé made from the area can pack a punch. In the Southern Rhone you find the Tavel region famous for dry, onion skinned coloured rosé made from grenache that can reach 13 per cent alcohol and demand to be drunk with food. Grenache is also behind the sweet fortified wines of Rasteau, and in the Languedoc-Roussillon region, the wines of Rivesaltes, Banyuls and Maury.

In Spain garnacha was only planted in Rioja after phylloxera went through

aroma can range from ripe red fruits such as red currant and raspberry or be more spice driven towards white pepper. What I particularly want to see from good grenache and GSM blends is a round, silky mouth-feel. It is all about texture and a velvet palate without being overtly warm and alcoholic.

d'Arenberg estimate they own one-third of the old bush vines in McLaren Vale and produce nine different wines with a grenache component. d'Arenberg's winemaker Chester Osborn runs me through what is special about the old vines. "Grenache is very site sensitive. The soil/geology and climate are all major influences. Whilst the wines

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the region but it is now entrenched as the supporting grape to tempranillo. But probably the most famous region in Spain for garnacha is the region of Priorat. This isolated region in Catalunya is an hour or so drive inland but you feel as though that you have gone back four centuries in time. The landscape is dry and barren; the villages are ancient. Old gnarled bush vines, planted at around 400m, were brought back to life in the late 1990s. The wines, sometimes blended with carienra (carignan) and cabernet sauvignon, are concentrated, rich with black fruits, licorice, spicy and laced with French oak. Try Agnes de Cervera's Lytos. For more reasonably priced Spanish grenache try the region of Montsant and the wines of Celler de Capçanes.

Moving back home, grenache excels in the McLaren Vale and Barossa Valley as well as tiny enclaves such as Ferguson Valley in Western Australia. Grenache, shiraz mourvedre (GSM) blends are popular in all three. Generally grenache

character does vary from one year to another, on the whole the old vines, if not fertilised or irrigated, will devigorate and produce more soil influenced aromas, flavours and tannins, possibly more violet and spicy characters."

"Young vines can also make very good wine, but only at very low, uneconomical yields and if very devigourated." Chester adds.

McLaren Vale also has a range of sub-regional nuances. "The warmer southern part produces slightly more oily thick grenache with less length," Chester believes. The sandier soils around McLaren Vale town and flats produce fruity gritty structure and often a "sooty earth" character, he adds. "North of the town the wines become bold, gutsy and solid, whilst Blewitt Springs produces more perfumed wines with a violet note and long, fine tannins". Which only goes to show, when you scratch the surface there is a lot to explore and love about this beautiful variety.