



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

COMING TO TERMS WITH FACT AND FICTION

There are some myths and favourite one-liners that have stayed with me for countless years and, to my embarrassment because they were frankly not true, or at best a case of me using my “poetic license”, I have shared with wine students.

I’ve finally vanquished some of them and it all stems from a recent, in-depth study of the wines of France via the French Wine Society.

First, my misapprehension that Champagne was the birthplace of sparkling wine. This honour goes to the monks at St Hilaire who crafted a sparkling Blanquette de Limoux some 150 years before Dom Perignon in 1531. Limoux is located in what is termed the Atlantic corridor area of the Languedoc. An area that, although it is in deepest southern France, gets the benefit of cooler Atlantic influences to craft its sparkling wines made from predominately mauzac with the occasional splash of chardonnay and chenin blanc. It can still be made in the old Ancestrale style that undergoes a partial fermentation before being bottled and allowed to continue to ferment to create the bubbles.

Such is the diversity of France that there are strange and wonderful blends around every corner. Take another one of my myths that Australia owns the concept of blending shiraz and cabernet sauvignon. Well, wrong. If you look at the permitted varieties grown in South Western France in appellations such as Cotes du Marmandais or Cotes de Millau, then you will see syrah is blended with fer, gamay and cabernet sauvignon. This region, around the Garonne and Tarn rivers, is a meeting point between Bordeaux varieties and the Rhone, so it

is not surprising they blend both Atlantic and Mediterranean grape varieties. The same goes when you enter the Languedoc region of Cabardes where blends consist of merlot, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, syrah and grenache to name a few. However, when you look at what is permitted and what is bottled, then Australia could still

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rightly claim the benchmark country for this blend.

Another presumption is that the French wouldn’t use staunchly Italian and Spanish grapes. I was aware that Italian vermentino was planted in Provence as well as Languedoc. It goes under the name of rolle. But I was fairly ignorant about tempranillo and sangiovese being planted in France. The island of Corsica shares so many ties with Italy, so I half expected sangiovese to be planted and found on the island. Corsica initially belonged to the Italian city of Genoa until it was ceded to France in 1768. What I find amusing is the knowledge that if Napoleon Bonaparte had been born a few years earlier he might have been officially Italian and not French, which could have changed the annals of history. Sangiovese is permitted in the IGP (Indication Geographique Protegee) grapes of Languedoc, alongside tempranillo. IGPs replaced the old Vine de Pays system in 2009.

In France sangiovese goes under the name nielluccio or niellucciu if grown in Corsica.

How about sauvignon blanc growing in Burgundy? Never! Well, yes, it can be found in one village south west of Chablis called St Bris le Vineux and it has its own AOC.

It’s commonly accepted that in Australia we have relaxed wine laws and can plant any grape variety we wish, but in France they are tied to draconian rules and regulations. True, but you see exceptions to the rules everywhere you look and there is an extremely long list of permitted grape varieties in many regions. Pinot gris, for instance, is grown widely, including Alsace, Loire and Burgundy. The white grape can also be added to red beaujolais up to a maximum of 15 per cent. In the 12th century pinot gris was praised in the Cote de Beaune red only village of Volnay and was the most sought after wine. The same liberal plantings apply to chenin blanc which is influential in South West France. Chenin is an underwhelming grape variety in Australia. But grown in the Loire it produced France’s most long-lived white wine in Savennieres that displays high levels of acidity and minerality. It also makes superb dessert wines. Gamay and chardonnay are also found planted in Loire and not just Bourgogne and Beaujolais.

I’d always regarded phylloxera as a curse, but in a way it was a blessing to many regions. It gave producers an opportunity to change the region’s make-up and made them focus on better grape varieties. Look at the Upper Loire for instance. Prior to phylloxera the region was planted to chasselas, a grape found these days in Switzerland and Savoie,

but the vigneron found it hard to graft over so they switched to sauvignon blanc which gave birth to sancerre. Prior to phylloxera, mourvedre was widely planted in the southern Rhone Valley but it was hard to graft on to American rootstock so it was replaced by grenache and syrah. Plantings of mourvedre dropped from 33 per cent to 3 per cent.

In many regions the vine was planted "en foule" or in a crowd. After phylloxera this haphazard method was replaced with vines planted in rows and planted to single variety rather than mixed varieties. This enabled mechanisation of the vineyard, stronger vines and single fermentations with subsequent blending opportunities. A case of "adversity is the mother of invention".

Another myth is that riesling has been at home in Alsace for centuries. Well it may have a long history there but the region was extensively planted to low quality hybrid vines after phylloxera went through the region. Fortunately these vines were ripped out and three-quarters of the vines were destroyed in World War II by an unlikely army. In 1942 the Third Reich sent Hitler Youth cadets into Alsace to destroy the vineyards and presumably stop them competing with German vigneron. So after the war the vines were sensibly replanted with the varietal mix we have currently.

The last myth was that Italy far exceeded France in its complexity and number of grape varieties indigenous to the country. But in fact France has over 400 wine and spirit AOCs and there are 130 common grape varieties that the French Wine Society covers in its course, so it clearly challenges Italy in complexity.

