



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

## RICH REWARDS ALONG PATHS LESS TRAVELLED

INCREASINGLY I'm looking for wines that swim against the tide. Something that isn't mainstream, but without sailing into uncharted waters of neglectful winemaking or deliberate oxidation. A wine that is still well made, but above all delivers on texture, flavour and intensity, especially on the palate. A unique wine crafted without the use of lashings of alcohol and new oak.

You might think sauvignon blanc wouldn't feature in an article about left-field wines. Led by New Zealand's mammoth Marlborough region they are the epitome of technically sound, clean, cool-fermented wines produced by university-educated winemakers. But I'm not excited by this. What I'm looking for, instead, is a wine with a hint of that distinctive methoxy pyrazine nose, to tell me I'm drinking a sauvignon blanc, but also complexity, weight and texture on the palate, which is definitely not the norm. Often these wines have been barrel fermented and matured in oak, and could be a blend of sauvignon blanc and semillon. Basically a classy white bordeaux blend notably in the Pessac-Leognan style. In Australia and leading by a country mile is a wine from Domaine A. Owner and winemaker Peter Althaus started making his Lady A sauvignon blanc way back in 1991. It's 100 per cent barrel fermented in new French barriques and left on fine lees for a year. The lees note comes through so much more than the oak, which I think is the key. On the palate it is powerful and racy with all natural acidity and extremely textured. It is one of the few sauvignon blancs that you can safely cellar for 10 years and beyond.

Skin contact is another trick to add texture to the palate. David Messum, winemaker

and owner of Born and Raised Wines, goes further than most by fermenting the wine in contact with its skins (like a red wine) and then leaving it on skins for 72 days. "I saw how good the variety can be when not pushed into the now considered normal commercial style," comments Messum. "The skin contact adds a new level of texture and aroma to the wines; it's an amber wine without the oxidation and this highlights the Sunbury region's relatively cool climate, pristine fruit well." He is even playing with longer skins contact; the 2014

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wine has seen 104 days. But he says it is still "clean, fresh with balanced acidity to the phenolic texture. Those that say 'I hate sav blanc' normally love this wine".

Multi varietal blends are another avenue to explore. But I'm suspicious when labels say it's a blend of chardonnay, semillon, riesling and viognier, and until convinced I surmise it to be a tank "leftover" wine. I want to encourage blends only when "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". I'm intrigued when I see the words "field blend" on the label. These are wines that have come from a vineyard with mixed plantings. A classic example can be found in Alsace, with the wines of Marcel Deiss. You simply don't ask him what grapes go into his wines.

The lovely perfumed, smoky, savoury Burg 2010 from a lieu dit close to the village of Bergheim has 13 grapes in it. He pursues vineyard terroir and is outspoken about it. "If you don't understand terroir then just drink Coca Cola," I was told on my last visit. Field blends are not common in Australia but the concept is being pursued by the likes of Conor van der Reest at Moorilla Estate in Tasmania. His Cloth Label White, for example, sees a blend of five whites and a red grape in the same blend. Whites are again fermented on skins.

Experimentation is all the craze at the moment and doing something different with riesling is popular. That can range from leaving a slug of residual sugar in it or putting the wine into oak. The 2014 Jamsheed Harem Series Le Blanc Plonk, for example, is a barrel fermented riesling from Victoria that spends eight to 10 months on lees. It's exotic and textured, and stands up to Asian cuisine well.

Turning to red wines there is nebbiolo. They seem to be popping up everywhere and although they can be high in alcohol and tannic as hell, it has not stopped a growing band of producers in bringing them to market. I consider them left field because I'm not convinced they have been embraced by the public, but Messum is a fan. "It's misunderstood and that's perhaps a reason I wanted to try and make a varietally correct Australian version. I love the aroma, palate profile and unashamedly unique hallmarks of firm fine tannin and long acidity," he said. "In the last year alone we are seeing a swell of interest in Australian nebbiolo, although the general public still looks for examples that are bigger, rounder

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and closer to shiraz. However there is a raft of producers making better, lighter styles. It's on the cusp of becoming more than a novelty or sommelier favourite."

Nebbiolo is grown around the country, with some hot spots like the Adelaide Hills. Messum sources his fruit from Heathcote and some people would say it is too hot for the variety. He thinks otherwise. "Other than a few 40°C days that is not entirely true. New vineyard management such as moving the fruiting wires to gain more shade helps the variety in its long, slow ripening and Heathcote has some older vine material on original rootstock."

Staying on an Italian theme there is Dr Brian Freeman's outstanding and well-established wine Secco, a blend of rondinella and corvina grapes. It's Australia's only plantings so that is rare in itself, but then a proportion of the grapes are given the Australian version of Amarone treatment and are placed in a neighbour's prune dehydrator to concentrate flavour and change the structure of the tannins in the seeds. The result is delicious.

You don't have to be on the edge of winemaking or growing obscure (for Australia) varieties to be left field. I've enjoyed mainstream wine styles in unexpected places. I most recently recall, dare I say, enjoying a pinot noir from the Hunter Valley and loving Tasmanian shiraz. The latter I suspect is going to be one of Australia's stars of the future and another story. 🍷



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