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LIGHT AND PRESERVATIVE-FREE - THE LATEST TRENDS IN WINE

THERE is a growing trend in the wine industry to diversity from the normal table wines portfolio. What some would have seen as gimmicks or passing fads are now established niche wines, popular among informed, enthusiastic consumers. Often the styles arise from the creativity and ingenuity of the vigneron. Some are developed out of economic necessity, and provide valuable cash flow, while others are simply created on a winemaker's whim, or after a request from customers.

An example of this extension of the marketplace is the growing trend towards light, fizzy, fruity wines made from the muscat grape. Yes, they can be seen as an attempt to attract a younger market into wine, and in some instances it is working well. But they are also versatile wines which can be excellent to serve on a hot, lazy Sunday lunchtime which can extend to an afternoon tipple. Or, alternatively, moscato can be an elegant, fresh way to finish off a meal.

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In Australia the label term moscato describes a wine made of at least 85 per cent of any muscat variety. Yarra Valley producer Innocent Bystander makes an attractive Pink Moscato out of two muscat grapes. Owner Phil Sexton explains why they chose the pairing of muscat gordo blanco (Muscat of Alexandria) and black muscat (Muscat of Hamburg) to make the wine. "We were looking for old-vine gordo and found several terrific vineyards around Swan Hill and we liked their very full character. The black muscat is mainly used for colour. Another key to this choice is that we get full flavour ripeness at around 10 degrees baume, hence there is no need to make any adjustment or additions to reach our final balance."

Production is simple. To make the wine sparkling they trap the initial carbon dioxide given off by pressurising the initial fermentation. Initially, Innocent Bystander sold the moscato only in half-bottles, but due to demand from the US market they now offer 750ml bottles. Recently they moved into the on-tap market. Around 25 pubs and bars have the product on-draught through a disposable 30-litre proprietary keg made of recyclable material. "Servicing these is a full-time job," admits Phil, with a degree of angst.

The style takes its inspiration from Asti and Moscato d'Asti, which both herald from the Piemonte region of Italy. The difference in the two styles is generally the amount of sparkle: moscato is frizzante or slightly sparkling, while asti is a full spumante or sparkling wine. Moscato d'Asti is generally regarded as a dessert wine, which is how some of our Australian wines could be sold, as a light alternative to a botrytis semillon

with a dish such as a fruit tart. Moscato also provides a low-alcohol way to finish a meal.

Another style that is coming in from the cold is preservative-free wines. Such red wines used to be as rare as hen's teeth, but more are appearing, and some are remarkably good.

Sulphur dioxide is the most traditional preservative and is used throughout the winemaking process. It is principally used as an antioxidant and protects the wine from bacteria spoilage which would turn the wine to vinegar. But it can cause an allergic reaction in some consumers, especially those prone to asthma or allergies.

David Lowe from Lowe Wines in Mudjee suffers from mild asthma and wanted to

develop a preservative-free wine, but all his old university lecturers use to tell him it couldn't be done. But now David cannot keep up with demand for his preservative-free merlot, which is fruit-driven, vibrant, fresh and crimson in colour.

Careful winemaking is required to produce preservative-free wine. First, you need healthy, pristine grapes (David uses grapes from organic and unirrigated vines), and after fermentation it is essential to keep the wine as chilled as possible to avoid unnecessary spoilage. David explains some of the problems in more detail: "Without sulphur the wine undergoes malolactic fermentation quickly, which then allows us to keep the wine at 5 degrees Celsius. We keep the wine CO2 saturated to help stop oxygen penetration. The biggest challenge is bottling the wine, since you have to warm the wine up to 15 degrees (so the labels can stick). The wine is filtered through three consecutive sets of filter sheet and must be filtered to 0.45 micron so no bugs attack the wine when in bottle. The additional challenge is setting the fill height on the bottle since the greater the ullage (the space at the top of the bottle) the more air, faster ageing and less freshness; yet if it is filled too full and is stored in a warm climate it will expand and spill out the capsule.

"It is such a challenge technically, and it needs good equipment, and most important of all superior grapes, hence organic and unirrigated. You can't do anything to the wine (in other words, no oak treatment), otherwise it will oxidise. It reminds me of a young, early-bottled Italian dolcetto: the wine is fresh but is balanced, vibrant, fruity and way better chilled."

New styles and trends continue to emerge. For instance, there is a growing number of producers looking to lower the alcohol levels of their wines, while still preserving the normal flavour profiles. But that will have to wait for another edition.