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MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

ARTISAN, boutique, garagiste, funky, niche-market, idiosyncratic or simply rustic, you can use whatever term you like to describe some of Australia's most interesting and diverse wine. Often it might simply be a small winery selecting an obscure grape variety to champion, but then there is the passionate producer that has "fire in their belly" for a style or a whole philosophy and way of life.

More often, wine talks of regional character, and these are still emerging and developing in Australia. Let's run through some well-known ones and perhaps a few forgotten gems. When we examine cabernet sauvignon we look for mint and eucalypt characters from Coonawarra, while Margaret River produces a more leafy, herbaceous edge. Yarra Valley produces round, gentle black fruits and cedar-driven wines often blended with other Bordeaux varieties. Australia is awash with shiraz, so we definitely need some regional diversity here. Hunter Valley should be medium bodied with subtle earthy, spicy notes and plum or cherry aromas. This is the nemesis of bold Barossa shiraz that delivers rich, powerful black berry, chocolate, sweet spice flavours that spar with vanilla new oak. As if true to their geographical location, some central and western Victorian shiraz often sit in-between these two styles. Heathcote delivers concentrated black fruits, soft ripe tannins; while Grampians has a spice and black pepper edge. More lighter, juicy, elegant, spicy and peppery wines can now be found from cooler sites in Mornington Peninsula, Margaret River and the Great Southern. Grenache seems at home in McLaren Vale as does semillon in the Hunter Valley and riesling in the Clare and Eden Valley as well as Frankland River. Pinot noir requires a cooler climate so Tasmania, Macedon and Mornington Peninsula are a few of its haunts; but does any exhibit regional character?

Some forgotten or less publicised wine styles are Western Australia's hotter climate chenin blanc and verdelho, the latter a

surprising foil to any Australian pinot gris/grigio. Or the glorious fortified wines of the Swan Valley. Emerging styles could possibly be chardonnay from Beechworth and sauvignon blanc from Tasmania.

Besides regional factors, a winery can influence the style of wine by either its management of the vineyard or winemaking. Organically grown wine had such a stigma attached to it 15 years ago that it was the type of throwaway line a producer would occasionally mention to you in private, but never consider stamping it on their label. Nowadays it is so commonly encountered, that if the producer is not following at least "minimal intervention" practices, you wonder what is wrong with them. Hardly a niche topic anymore, but then we come to the biodynamic approach.

A wine needs to pass on a message about its origins or owners.

Biodynamic agricultural practices were pioneered by Austrian philosopher and scientist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). A distinguishing feature of biodynamic farming is the use of nine biodynamic preparations prescribed by Steiner for the purpose of enhancing soil quality and stimulating plant life. They consist of mineral, plant or animal manure extracts, usually fermented and applied in small proportions to compost, manures, the soil, or directly on to plants. The focus is on feeding the soil not the plant.

Biodynamics also involves working with the cosmos and following the moon, sun and planet cycles. Where possible Cullen Wines, in Margaret River, carry out their vineyard work on the right days according to the astrological calendar. Can you taste the difference in the final product? The jury is still out on this one. But the approach can produce some interesting, unique

styles of wines. Cullen's red wines are often picked at lower than normal baume levels and therefore produce lower alcohol wines. They believe the vines achieve physiological ripeness at lower baume levels due to their vineyard management and can therefore be picked earlier. Minimal intervention in the winery goes along with biodynamic farming. In this way "the vineyard creates the wine", comments winemaker Vanya Cullen. Their wines are never powerful but medium bodied, elegant, fresh but ripe fruit-driven wines that can be effortlessly matched with food and it makes them a point of difference over other wines.

Up the coast from Cullen and taking a different approach to achieving a well-balanced wine is Western Australian stalwart Will Nairn, from Peel Estate. Established in 1973, the vineyard is close to the ocean on the plains just south of Perth. "We are about 1m above sea level," boasts Will. The vines sit in Tuart sand with a bedrock of hard limestone, a unique vineyard soil structure in Australia. With over 40 years of experience, Will has adapted to his environment working with what the seasons have to offer. Will was the first Australian producer to make an oak matured chenin blanc. But he is more renowned for his shiraz and cabernet sauvignon, they typically spend two years in oak and then are held for another two years in bottle before release. He has obviously worked out that this is the way to appreciate his wines, rather than release them as bold, brash youngsters. It is another example of developing a unique style, if you haven't the convenience of regionality.

A new, emerging marketing trend is to stamp a QR code on the back label for smart phone users to scan and read about the wine, check out a new Brancott Estate's bottle, it's "awesome" (to use the correct vernacular). But the message inside the bottle is far more important. A wine needs to pass on a message about its origins or owners. 