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BREAKING NEW GROUND WITH OLD VARIETIES

AFTER existing in obscurity for thousands of years, many of the indigenous varieties found in countries such as Spain and Italy have not survived the hectic pace of the last millennium. Phylloxera, oversupply, abandonment of rural life, and the relentless progression of urbanisation, or simply market pressures to plant foreign grape varieties over indigenous ones, are some of the causes.

Fortuitously, some regions were slow to change from traditional viticulture and both countries have finally recognised the rich diversity of wines that these grapes can produce; given modern, sensitive, winemaking techniques. Australia's inherent sense of adventure has explored these varieties and brought the best of them back home. Take Coriole's Mark Lloyd, for example, with Fiano. Fiano is an ancient white grape mentioned in the writings of Pliny, and is found in Campania in southern Italy. The name may have derived from Appiano, a type of apple, relating to the apple character the wine can display. Initially it was cultivated entirely in Irpinia in the Apennine Mountains by the dominant local producer Mastroberardino, who claims to have saved the variety from extinction in 1945. Fiano produces apple, pear and pineapple flavours with a certain creamy texture, think pinot gris but with more aromatics. In Campania, the most important wine region for Fiano is Avellino. Mark Lloyd spotted Fiano's potential at Vintality in 2000. When he came back to Australia he was amazed to find out that the local vine improvement society had vine material which had originally been imported into Australia in the 1970s. From these cuttings he produced his first wine in 2005. Lloyd comments on its production: "Fiano is low yielding with small berries so we pick by hand and whole bunch press to control the phenolic content in the wine. It gives the wine a rich texture that doesn't require oak".

Our rich Italian migrant heritage has also provided the impetus to explore obscure

varieties. The King Valley producers have promoted many of them, including the white grape, Arneis. It is a white grape variety grown in Piemonte around Roero. The loose bunch, thick skinned grapes, produce wines with low acidity with typical Italian almond aromas.

Turning to red wines, Barbera is Italy's second most planted black grape variety, found principally around the towns of Asti and Alba in Piemonte. It is a versatile grape variety that can get the five-star treatment with new oak and low yields, or can be made into a simple plum fruit-driven wine with characteristically higher than normal acidity. In Australia, the old Montrose Estate (now part of Robert Oatley Vineyards) in Mudgee can claim the oldest plantings of Barbera, probably smuggled into the

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country by legendary Italian winemaker Carlo Corino in his suitcase in the 1970s; however Dromana Estate and Brown Brothers were more successful pioneers and produced a range of wines based on Italian varieties such as Barbera, selecting grapes from the King Valley in north-east Victoria. Angullong (Orange) and Margan (Broke Fordwich) are two more recently tasted good examples.

Dolcetto, a fruit driven, drink-early style of red wine, originating again from Piemonte, has a great heritage story in Australia. Best's Nursery Block vineyard in Great Western, Victoria, is planted with 140-year-old vines that were initially recorded as Malbeck (sic) but subsequently identified as Dolcetto. The vineyard still produces a wine from the original 1860s vines, supplemented by other grapes planted a mere 40 years ago in 1971. Could the Nursery Block be the oldest Dolcetto vines in the world? Some Australian styles have been made slightly "frizzante" and are best served chilled.

The little known Sagrantino is a high quality Italian red grape similar to Sangiovese. The small, thick skinned berries produce a full bodied red with strong colour, blackberry aromas and powerful tannins. Most of the plantings in Italy are from Montefalco in Umbria. Our Queensland Granite Belt is home to a good example made by Preston Peak and shows great potential in Australia.

We don't have a wealth of Spanish migrants that have influenced our wine styles as much as the Italians have, however there is a rise in interest in Spanish grape varieties. Tempranillo has grown in stature to the extent that we now have the "TempraNeo" group of producers promoting this central and northern Spanish grape. It's a versatile variety that can suit both cool and warmer sites in Australia.

Finally, Albariño has a short, stormy history in Australia with the 2009 discovery that the variety has been mixed up with Savagnin Blanc and a number of vineyards were mistakenly planted with this less desirable vine. Albariño is Spain's top quality dry white originating from the damp Rias Baixas region in north western Spain. It survives the wet climate by being grown on well-ventilated, overhead pergola trellising and having thicker skins that resist fungal disease, which would make it eminently suitable for some of our steamier regions such as the Hunter Valley.

Brand loyalty is a common theme across all consumer purchases. We could say that the wine sector has "varietal loyalty" when it comes to purchasing wine, we tend to stick to the same one or two grapes. But with approximately 137 different grape varieties available in Australia, and education at our finger tips, there is no excuse to try something different and break new ground.