



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

GRENACHE, AN UNSUNG HERO ON AUSTRALIA'S WINE LANDSCAPE

ON A RECENT episode of the American Grape Radio an American sommelier-cum-winemaker described his "eureka" moment and the wine behind it. Rounding up the usual suspects, I expected to hear him talk about tasting a Chateau Latour, Le Pin or perhaps a DRC (Domaine Romanee Conti). However, I was pleasantly surprised to learn it was one of our own local unsung heroes: d'Arenberg's The Custodian 1998. This 100 per cent grenache wine from McLaren Vale made me wonder about the greatness of what is regarded by some as a blending and otherwise workhorse variety. So who better to put the question to than its winemaker and McLaren Vale authority, Chester Osborn?

All great wines reflect their terroir, so does grenache respond to various environments? Well, it is found internationally in mainly Spain, France and Italy. It is planted on various soils, such as the calcareous alluvial sandstones of southern Rhone and the schist-like quartz and slate *licorella* soils of Priorat (or Priorato) in northern Spain.

As love affairs go, Australia and grenache are there for the long term. We tied the knot and planted it to produce fortified wines in our colonial days.

In Australia, Chester highlights the Blewitt Spings sub-region at McLaren Vale: "Its sand and clay soil works well. When they haven't been fertilised the sands give very good aromatics and when the yields are kept right back they get very solid, vibrant tannins." Low-fertility soils are necessary for grenache as it can easily produce big clusters and high yields. The maritime influence is another factor: the grapes ripen earlier closer to the sea and produce rich, fuller wines, but this factor can be tempered in cooler vintages to produce more elegant wines.

Altering the picking times provides different flavours as well. "When picked early, grenache displays red fruits and spicy

notes with more gritty tannins, although you don't want to pick too early," says Chester. "At around 12.5 to 13 degrees baume they can be quite interesting wines with very good acidity. As you get to around 13.5 to 15 degrees you get darker fruits and thicker wines with more character, but the sand still gives them a beautiful fragrance and length. The really low-yielding vineyards are best picked not too ripe, around 13.5 to 14 degrees."

We need to celebrate quality grenache, especially wines sourced from old vines, as we do with shiraz in the Barossa, for example. So in 2004 McLaren Vale established the Cadenzia project, which applies to top label wines that are grenache-based. Last year a certification program was launched, which involves the wines being assessed in each vintage by a panel consisting of winemakers and a prominent Master of Wine. Cadenzia's chairman Peter Fraser, winemaker at Yangarra Estate, hopes the certification process will "encourage wines

that showcase the region and highlight the diversity and individual nature of grenache".

Grenache buds early but ripens later than cabernet sauvignon, which explains the potential for the grapes to have high sugar content; and fermented to dryness means high alcohol levels. It also means you need a long, dry autumn, avoiding botrytis which can affect the tight berry clusters. It is suited to bush vine viticulture, it has thick, wooded trunks and grows upright. The grape seems adaptable to heat and drought, making it ideal for South Australia, especially McLaren Vale and the Barossa Valley. In fact, outside our large irrigated regions you don't find much grenache in states like Victoria, Western Australia or New South Wales.

Dave Powell at Torbreck is another grenache fan, but this time utilising the richness of old vine material available in the Barossa Valley. Drawing his inspiration from both the northern and southern Rhone wines, he makes an impressive line-up of intense and stylish wines, with grenache playing its part in a number of labels. Les Amis, for example, is 100 per cent grenache from a Seppeltsfield block planted in 1901.

As love affairs go, Australia and grenache are there for the long term. We tied the knot and planted it to produce fortified wines in our colonial days; plantings in the Vale go back to the 1850s. But as their popularity faded, its versatility came to the fore and is used for rose as well as for table wines.

Grenache runs second to Spanish airen as the world's most widely planted variety.

A sample of the worldwide 'hot spots' for grenache includes Rioja, Navarra and Priorat in Spain; and Cote du Rhone, Chateauneuf du Pape, Gigondas and Tavel in France. It makes fortified *vin doux naturel* wines in Rasteau, Banyuls and Maury in southern France. The grape also pops up in Paso Robles in California.

In Chateauneuf-du-Pape, grenache often opens the batting on the 13 authorised grape varieties that can make up the blend. Its most common blending partners are shiraz (syrah) mourvedre and cinsault, GSM being a common acronym used in Australia for this Rhone blend.

So has grenache the power to inspire? Chester Osborn certainly thinks so. "When it's done well it certainly surprises people, but some people have abused grenache and made it overripe or light and confectionary. When it ages it develops a sweet and spicy character, which is very enveloping and can match very well with some difficult foods such as Indian curries. Like all great wines, it can be challenging and inspiring - and wine should be challenging."