



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

## AGEING GRACEFULLY

I HAD the privilege of taking overseas guests around Rutherglen recently and when they saw the aged barrels and the dusty old wineries their concept of Australia only being a hi-tech, mass produced, tank farm-driven industry was shattered. When they tasted the wines of the region they were lost for words as they are beyond comparison to any other wine in the world. I am, of course, talking about the fortified wines of North East Victoria and in particular the muscat and topaque wines of Rutherglen.

How are these wines made? We don't need European comparisons, they are uniquely Australian, but I do like this explanation. Think of it this way: it's a madeira, port and sherry rolled into one. They have the sweetness of port and fermented in a similar manner, but far sweeter. They have similarities to madeira where the wines are subjected to heat in some incredibly hot cellars over decades, and they are matured in an Australian version of a sherry solera system using ancient barrels. We add the term "liqueur" to their title to indicate they have been fortified with grape spirit and that is where we can start. Fortified styles have always been made in Rutherglen since the early gold rush days and the hot, dry conditions suited the production of rich, sweet, and what was regarded in those days as "ladies" wines.

These incredibly complex wines are officially described as a Vins Doux Naturels. VDNs are fortified wines that have high strength grape spirit added to the partially fermented must to make a strong (18 per cent alcohol) sweet wine. They get their aromas and flavours from

the grapes as well as the ageing process.

The key difference between the two wines is the grape variety, as the winemaking is practically identical. Muscat is made from muscat blanc, a petit rouge or simply brown muscat, while topaque is made from the muscadelle grape. The hot, dry climatic conditions in North East Victoria allow the grapes to ripen and go raisined on the vine before picking.

---

*Isabella has an incredible average age of 50 years and some parts are 70 years old.*

---

Stanton and Killeen make both wines and they have what is described as a high extraction style. Winemaker Andrew Drumm explains: "fortified wines are all about balance - they obviously have plenty of grape sugar and fruit flavour but this must be balanced by the 'drying' effects of alcohol, acidity and (in our case) phenolics".

Phenolic compounds are found in and around the skins of the grape and the seeds. The most important phenolic compounds in winemaking are anthocyanins which contribute the colour and tannins that give us that dry, astringent mouth feel in red wines. But remember we are talking about white grapes here and colour and tannin is not something we normally talk about in white wines. Phenolics are usually extracted during fermentation but these wines are

hardly fermented before spirit is added. So it's a challenge.

It's more about balancing the richness and getting the flavour compounds out of the grapes. Drumm explains: "To achieve our signature style we use a very extractive winemaking process. We use a pre-fermentation 'cold soak' process in a rotary fermenter to ensure maximum flavour extraction, while also giving us the phenolic profile. A rotary fermenter is ideal for this as we can fully macerate the fruit while also keeping it as cold as possible. We add enzymes and SO<sub>2</sub> to the must then macerate at 0-10C for about a week. We then allow the temperature to rise and fermentation to commence. We do not press until at least 1 degree Baume of fermentation has occurred, as the fermentation process also assists with flavour extraction."

Some companies such as Baileys of Glenrowan don't ferment at all and fortify the juice after a period of cold soak. While at Campbells they have a relatively short maceration of between 36 and 48 hours before it is pressed off and fortified. All these subtle differences produce various house styles.

The wines are then placed into old barrels of various sizes and stored for many years. Heat, oxidation and evaporation concentrates the wines. They are blended in a Solera system in cellars that can reach 50C in summer, so it is not surprising that a balance of younger wine is mixed in to add some fresh fruit flavours, depending on the style. On average, the cask loses about 3-5 per cent of wine per year through evaporation and it's during this time the wines develop what's

# BAROSSA VALLEY



## GOD'S HILL

*The wines with a heart and soul*

called a rancio character. Rancio is best described as a nutty, walnut and toffee aroma or flavour.

In Rutherglen, six producers (Stanton and Killeen, Morris, All Saints, Campbells, Pfeiffer wines and Rutherglen Estates) participate in a classification system which has four levels. Rutherglen Muscat is the youngest style and shows some fresh fruit but is still intensely sweet. Classic Muscat has more cask age flavours and the beginnings of a rancio character, while Grand Muscat is richer and more concentrated with clear rancio flavours. At the top of the tree is Rare Muscat which has prolonged cask ageing and is extremely luscious and concentrated with clear rancio flavours. The same four-tier classification system applies to topaque as well. The classification is based on style and not simply age. But at Stanton and Killeen their Classic Topaque is drawn from an average of 12-year-old stock. The Grand is 15 to 20 years old and the Rare is over 20 years old, to give you an idea.

Generally muscat is around 50g/litre higher in residual sugar than topaque. Muscat displays pure liquid raisin character when young moving through fruit cake, coffee, caramel and eventually treacle with age. I've grown to appreciate topaque more. It's a little more savoury, with classic cold earl grey tea, fish oil, soya, malt and sweet balsamic notes. Campbells' Topaque Rare, called Isabella, has an incredible average age of 50 years and some parts are 70 years old. This is clearly a labour of love, holding wine this long must drive the accountants insane.



**Thanks to our GH soil we finally have an authentic Italian variety from Campania in the Barossa! Produced by Winemaker Charlie Scalzi from Campania Italy! As some non red drinkers & clients have said "now I can drink red!" Low alcohol and full of fruit flavour.**

**HANDCRAFTED, SMALL BATCH, ESTATE PRODUCED WINES WITH METICULOUS SELECTION OF FRUIT BY CHARLIE SCALZI, WINEMAKER.**

**VISIT OUR CELLAR DOOR**

**OPEN EVERY FIRST SATURDAY OF EVERY MONTH  
OPEN - 11am - 4.30pm. BOOKINGS PHONE 0412 836 004  
WE DO LUNCH BY PRIOR BOOKING & MAXIMUM 10 PEOPLE**

Visit our online shop to PURCHASE our quality wine

[www.godshillwines.com](http://www.godshillwines.com)

