



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

THE CURIOUS CASE OF ALBARINO

ALBARINO has had an interesting story coming to Australia. It was nearly ten years ago now that the news broke that what we thought was albarino vines planted in Australia was in fact savagnin (AKA traminer). You have to go back to 1989 to the source of the error where initial imports of vine material purchased from the Spanish National Collection and sent to the CSIRO were incorrectly labelled. It was only discovered when French ampelographer Jean Michel Boursiquot from the University of Montpellier, questioned the authenticity of vines he found planted in the Barossa Valley.

It was a huge mistake, given that savagnin, a grape found in the Jura regions of France, was, and still is regarded as a less attractive grape and harder to sell. However savagnin does make some interesting wine and is famous for producing the sherry-like flor affected vin jaune wines. In fact, as a side note, Crittenden Estate on the Mornington Peninsula turned adversity into opportunity and went ahead and produced the Cri de Coeur Savagnin, a barrel fermented wine that is aged under flor for a four year period before being bottled without filtration, fining or stabilization (current vintage is 2013). When the news broke it stopped a number of producers labelling their wines and subsequently vignerons either went with the flow or grafted over the savagnin. But this is not the first time we have misrepresented grape varieties and you only have to go back a further 20 years to the early 70's when we called semillon - Hunter River riesling, crouchen - Clare riesling and shiraz - Hermitage.

What is curious about albarino is that

it seems to have never got over this false start to life in Australia. Perhaps it is because it coincided with the rapid expansion of imported wines into Australia providing consumers with more choices? Albarino (or Albariño) comes from the far north western Spanish region of Galicia which fronts both the Atlantic Ocean and the Bay of Biscay. It has a long wine history stretching back to the 16th Century. It is commonly a single variety but can be found blended with other white varieties such as treixadura, godello and loureiro.

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Galicia is made up of a number of regions including Ribeiro, Valdeorras, Ribeira Sacra and Monterrei. But it is the sub-region of Rias Baixas that dominates plantings and where the Albarino shines. Here the weather is cool to warm and often wet with sea mists, conditions that do not suit many grape varieties. However, because of its thick skins albarino avoids rot problems and can tolerate wet weather and even rain at harvest.

The grape travels from Galicia over the border to Portugal and is found in the

wines of Vinho Verde. Here it is known as alvarinho. Traditional Vinho Verde wines were bottled with some carbon dioxide which was the bi-product of a secondary malolactic fermentation.

It is not surprising to see albarino grown in the Hunter Valley, a region that can experience wet harvests and rot issues. It shares some similarities with semillon being prone to high yields and is happily made unoaked. Winemaker Andrew Margan from Margan Wines in Broke planted albarino in 2014, having sourced his cuttings from Yalumba nursery. He has just had his third vintage in 2018.

I asked him what first made him interested in this variety. "We have spent a fair bit of time in northern Spain including doing the Camino de Santiago twice. In our time in Galicia we had the opportunity to taste a lot of albarino and discovered how amazing the wine can be. Rias Baixas is actually classified as warm maritime just like the Hunter Valley and the very best wines we tasted have a lot in common with Hunter Valley semillon, for example they give ripe fine flavours at lower alcohols and high acidity."

Albarino can be grown successfully in both cool and warm climates. It retains good levels of acidity and has a rich palate similar, but not as intense as, viognier. The warm climate styles can display rich floral, honey and stone fruit aromas. The cooler styles tend towards citrus, marzipan and apple.

Albarino's aromas are from the vast array of volatile compounds that can be found in the wine. The grape varieties share similar compounds to gewürztraminer and muscat. One of the most common is

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2-phenylethanol which can be identified by a floral rose and honey aroma. Linalool is another whilst the presence of Limonene gives citrus peel aromas. As his vines mature and come into balance, Andrew is finding some fascinating aromas and flavours starting to develop. "We are the first to grow it in the State so I am having to learn as I go along with the flavour profile and structure of the wine. What I did notice this year was a really strong 'Fruit Tingle' flavour coming in at around 11.5 % sugar. In fact it was the development of this ripe flavour that made me decide to harvest the grapes. I didn't want grapes to go into the next stage of ripeness which starts to pick up spice and have the 'diesel' character." Andrew used the leaf canopy to shade the fruit so as to not expose the young vines to too much sun and heat, which can be the cause of the spice and then petrol/diesel terpenes (chemical compounds) developing. "The other thing I noticed this year was how salty the fruit tastes and that has translated through to the finished wine. The Spaniards believe the salt comes from the Atlantic but I can assure them we are a long way from the Atlantic!" He remarks.

Winemaking of Marga's albarino is kept similar to semillon with natural yeast used and a cool 15-18 degree fermentation in stainless steel.

There remains only a handful of producers of albarino in Australia but I'm confident this variety has found a new home and a bright future. 

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