

A photograph of a dark wine bottle and a glass of red wine on a rustic wooden surface. The bottle is on the left, and the glass is on the right, partially filled with a dark red wine. The background is a blurred wooden wall.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

FOR SO LONG IN A BACK-UP ROLE TO CABERNET SAUVIGNON, SHIRAZ ELBOWED ITS WAY ON TO THE WORLD WINE STAGE IN THE 1980S.

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THE name “shiraz” has only really been used widely for about 40 years. “What nonsense,” I hear you say. But until the late 1970s most Australian wines made with shiraz grapes were labelled “hermitage” or “burgundy” with very few having “shiraz” written on the label. The rest of the world called it syrah.

There are still some arguments as to where the variety originated from. Was it from the Persian town (now Iran) of Shiraz? Or was it from Hermitage in the Rhone, as claimed by the French? Or perhaps it is the syriaca variety that *Pliny the Elder* wrote about over 20 centuries ago. Forty years ago in Australia, shiraz was considered as a lesser variety than the majestic cabernet sauvignon, as many wineries aspired to produce a cabernet-based, “bordeaux-like” wine.

In the mid to latter 1980s, shiraz was promoted from being a “workhorse” variety into being Australia’s flagship wine variety capable of matching/beating syrah from the rest of the world. This promotion was mainly as a result of the British and Americans discovering the quality of Penfolds Grange. They then began searching for other premium Australian shiraz and found plenty. The result was that in just a few years shiraz went from almost being “a zero” to being “the hero”. Australia can now claim to be the spiritual home of shiraz, in the same way Argentina claims malbec and Chile carmenere.

As shiraz was shooting towards global fame, the Australian wine industry, in my opinion, missed out on the greatest marketing opportunity. Had the industry had the foresight to trade mark the word “shiraz” while nobody else was using it, Australia could have had it exclusively. By now drinkers all around the world would only be using the word “shiraz” in relation to syrah grown in Australia, just like champagne and bordeaux are used. What a coup that would have been. Instead, today you can find wines labelled shiraz from Chile, Spain, southern France, etc. Such a shame.

While not exactly “terroirists”, the good folk in McLaren Vale have been pushing hard to establish their region as a unique shiraz-growing environment. They have succeeded to the extent that McLaren Vale is today recognised as a world-renowned and highly regarded wine growing region, especially for shiraz.

At the annual Wirra Wirra Ringing of the Bell (which officially launches McLaren Vale’s vintage), the geological project committee conducted the McLaren Vale Districts Tasting Tutorial at which the attendees learned about the region’s current and ongoing research project into the “geology of the McLaren Vale region”.

Over time the project group has, in conjunction with geologists, dug five geology pits across the region as well as drawing up geological profiles of the

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region. These have been divided (so far) into 19 different proposed sub-districts/structures which have been classified as “distinct districts”. A look at this map shows that the same distinct profiles can and do appear in more than one area within the McLaren Vale region, mainly as a result of countless millennia of geological upheaval.

These distinct districts take into account not only the geology, but also the effects of topography, elevation and the impact of the micro-climate. The group claims “McLaren Vale is one of the most geologically diverse wine regions in the world. More than 40 unique geological units are present, ranging in age from less than 10,000 years to over 650 million years”.

The main purpose of the tutorial was the District Tasting. The panel explained that for this exercise they had sought 2017 vintage shiraz samples from as many producers as possible within each of 15 out of the 19 distinct districts that they had identified on the draft geological map of the region. The samples from within each district were evaluated by a panel of winemakers and viticulturists, who judged these samples blind. Other than the rejected “out of left field” samples (too green or oaky, etc) the rest of the wines were blended together



to create a final “district sample”. They had very few rejects. From the blended samples they picked the five districts that the judging panel deemed to be the most “uniquely expressive”, to use for the tutorial.

Therefore, the five sample wines we tasted were each a representational sample of the shiraz made in the one specific geological district.

The outcome of this fascinating exercise was that there was an appreciable difference in the flavours and characters of the different wines from the five different districts, with District 10 having the fullest body and greater structure, whereas District 17 had the lightest and brightest of the wines. Each sample was an excellent wine in its own right, but they had different flavour profiles.

What does this all mean? The aim is to over time identify and define sub-regional characteristics. So that in turn the producers are able to better work with both the grapes and the wines that each district produce, and educate consumers as to the differences between the sub-regions. In other words, this is a serious effort to understand the impact that the geology of the district has on the flavour and wine style of the local shiraz.

It has been suggested to the committee

that even though it is early days in a long-term project, it should start making “mud maps” based on the data of the local geology and make them available at cellar doors for visitors use, so that drinkers can (over time) come to appreciate the subtle differences that the geology and micro-climate of each sub-region has on the style and flavour of the final wines. This is somewhat similar, but completely different, to the way in which Burgundy is subdivided into small parcels/areas with similar flavours.

The Barossa Valley has also independently undertaken a study of its own - The Barossa Grounds Project. Started in 2008 with the aim of evaluating the wine styles across the region, the “Grounds” are an unofficial but locally recognised locality observed through the micro-climate, soil composition, geology and individual vineyard site. As with the McLaren Vale project, the Barossa project has been all inclusive, with active involvement from soil scientists, viticulturists and winemakers.

Because the geology isn’t as complicated as that of the Vales, the Barossa Grounds Project proposes three defined localities within the Barossa Valley GI. These are defined as Southern Grounds, Central Grounds and Northern Grounds. Each

of these are made up of varying micro-climates, soils and landscapes which are deemed to exhibit different and compelling expressions of shiraz.

The style of shiraz from each of the Grounds is described as: Southern Grounds - Medium to full-bodied, generous, lush, elegant and refreshing; Central Grounds - Medium to full-bodied, generous and vibrant; Northern Grounds - Full-bodied, opulent, concentrated and rich.

These two approaches, although very different, are both serious, long-term regional initiatives, to better understand how the flavour profiles of their shiraz is impacted upon by the various local factors that make their region unique.

While there are no concrete conclusions so far, it is the efforts of both McLaren Vale and the Barossa regions that will keep them ahead of the pack and firmly “front of mind”, in the wine world’s focus on shiraz/syrah. After all these two regions are literally “digging up the dirt on shiraz”.