

News

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News

Selling the region

- **by: Tony Love**
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Ross Pamment from Houghton Wines WA at blending bench for the White Classic

Source: AdelaideNow

AUSTRALIANS are obsessed by wine varieties.

We slavishly buy sauvignon blanc (from New Zealand, no less) rather than simply Kiwi white or sumptuous, pure Aussie shiraz although South Australia, especially the Barossa and McLaren Vale regions, claim instant recognition in that case.

Cabernet sauvignon as a solo act is entrenched, much like all the major noble varieties. Pinot gris and grigio almost gain double points. And just about all the so-called emerging Mediterranean-inspired wines making waves nowadays are dependent on the cache of their grape varieties fiano, vermentino, tempranillo, sagrantino and so on.

Our labels elevate grape varieties to hero worship, while often the region mostly shrinks to lesser importance and the style of wine to the obscurity of the back sticker, if at all.

Wine industry regulations support the notion, too we can name a wine as a single varietal on the label even if there is up to 15 per cent of other grapes in the wine.

Even the most recognised blends emphasise fruit components more than region or producer. Semillon-

sauvignon blanc, which we looked at closely last week, is the most popular white duet and has even gained its own diminutive nickname, sem-sauv, or even the brash SBS.

What's known as the great Australian red blend is always sold as shiraz-cabernet or vice versa. Very few examples develop their own persona via a proprietary or place name.

Likewise, the succulent red blends we know as GSMs celebrate the grenache, shiraz and mourvedre varieties.

This isn't the case in traditional European wines, which tend to emphasis the maker before the actual grapes crammed inside the bottle.

France's famed Chateauneuf-du-Pape reds are allowed to mix 13 different varieties, the blend usually grenache dominant. Imagine a label in Australia with all 13 plastered over the label.

We don't get near to that kind of fruit salad, though one of the most established examples of blending multiple varieties in Australia does mix up to six different grape varieties and has even spawned a naming convention.

What was originally known as Houghton White Burgundy is now White Classic, and the "classic" part of that is widely used now by other Western Australia producers.

Predominantly using chenin blanc as its core white variety, sitting around 50 per cent and varying vintage to vintage plus or minus 10 per cent, the minor cast members are chardonnay, verdelho, semillon, riesling and muscadelle.

The Houghton Classic blend is notching its 75th consecutive year this vintage, and at \$12 a bottle, it's become embedded as one of the country's most popular whites at that price.

Houghton winemaker Ross Pamment believes each component has a role to play: the chenin blanc is the traditional fruit source, chardonnay brings palate weight and creaminess, verdelho adds a nice tropical aromatic, the semillon a line through the middle, riesling tweaks the acidity, and muscadelle offers a dash of nutmeg intrigue.

"The balance makes for quite a versatile wine," Ross says. "I think of it as a 'veranda style' wine."

Much newer to the spectrum of white blends are Chapel Hill winemakers Michael Fragos and Bryn Richards, who decided it was time to put together a wine that showcased the regional strengths of McLaren Vale and could make a distinct statement alongside what the district is most known for, its robust reds.

The winemakers took into account the area's coastal influence on lifestyle and viticulture, the cultural diversity of its growers, winemakers and emerging varieties, and also the regional food focus of the Vales.

"We thought we could not meet all these elements with just one white variety," Michael says. "Our logic was that we would achieve that range of layering and complexity by blending different varieties, and each would bring something different to the table to benefit the whole."

The result is the first release of a Chapel Hill 2011 il Vescovo McLaren Vale White which is made up of 45 per cent savagnin, 30 per cent verdelho, and 25 per cent roussanne.

The savagnin brings savouriness and minerality, the verdelho adds some pungency and lift in the aromas as well as its early picked freshness, while the roussanne adds structure, weight and presence, according to Michael.

The quest to create a blend to reflect a region, sometimes even a single vineyard, is a trend we'll increasingly be seeing as more and more "new" varieties become available to winemakers.

TRY THESE WHITE BLENDS

HOUGHTON WHITE CLASSIC, \$12

THIS egalitarian white blend of several stalwart WA varieties comes together as an easy-drinking, fresh fruit salad of a wine. It has dobs

of lemon gelati tang and

a friendly, faint drop of sweetness.

CHAPEL HILL IL VESCOVO WHITE 2011, \$22

LOVELY floral opening notes, nicely weighted and an interesting savoury spice and fruit mix from three varieties in sync savagnin, verdelho and roussanne.

QUEALY POBBLEBONK!, \$25

THE 2011 (untasted) is about to hit the shelves, its predecessors highlighting a savoury freshness rather than sweetness of fruit with a unique twist.

TURKEY FLAT BUTCHERS BLOCK WHITE, \$22

A WELL trodden style based around France's Rhone Valley white varieties of marsanne, viognier and roussanne. Essentially a richer and fuller-flavoured white blend, often quite fragrant and with plenty of palate impact. Look also for Torbreck Woodcutters White, Murray Street Vineyards white blends, and d'Arenberg.

FREEMAN FORTUNA, \$25

FROM NSW's Hilltops region, this is wild at heart and vivacious to taste blend of pinot gris, riesling, sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and the lesser known aleatico variety. Quite rich and complex go, be adventurous.

TWISTED GUM VINEYARDS SEMILLON VERDELHO CHARDONNAY 2009, \$20

FROM Queensland's Granite Belt, this tiny producer mixes elements of tropical, citrus and stone fruit flavours into its blend.

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