

Brand noir day

Mornington Peninsula pinot comes of age.

If you'd sat down five years ago in front of 30 Mornington Peninsula pinot noirs, you would have struggled to find more than a handful to recommend. In the late 1990s, a combination of young vines, overcropping and some cool, wet vintages conspired to give pinots from the then rapidly expanding southern Victorian region a bad name: many of the wines from that period were pale in colour, vegetal in aroma and lacking in flavour.

As I found when I sat down the other day in front of 30 Peninsula pinots – mostly from the 2002 and 2001 vintages – things have improved. Partly this is a result of maturing vines, partly a greater attention to detail in the wineries, and partly a broad recognition among growers that yields have to be kept low to ripen crops properly – a point brought home painfully during the exceptionally cool 2002 vintage, where yields were pitifully small but flavour concentration in the grapes was unusually high.

Indeed, based on this recent tasting, one criticism of today's Peninsula pinots is not that they can be under-ripe and light, but that they can be over-ripe and heavy. Some growers are picking their grapes much later than they used to, resulting in prune-y, dark wines that lack either the variety's essential charm or the attractive floral, perfumed characters found in the region's best pinots.

The tasting was organised by the Mornington Peninsula Vignerons Association, who'd invited a gaggle of wine geeks (retailers, sommeliers, journos) to taste through the wines (blind, of course) and choose three to be served at a special pinot noir dinner. For the MPVA, this was generic promotion for the region and the variety that will culminate in a major two-day Pinot Noir Celebration early next year. For me, it was a great opportunity to find out who's making delicious pinot down there at the moment.

After tallying the points, re-tasting and scoring the top eight wines, amid much discussion, the best three were decided on: the 2002 Paringa Estate (another stunning effort from the region's best pinot maker – a succulent mix of ripe cherry and taut, concentrated forestry characters); the 2002 Willow Creek Tulum (from a winery that has improved out of sight over the past few years, this is a firm, fairly tannic, but perfumed and intense pinot); and the 2002 Scorpo (a very youthful, bright, raspberryish, but beautifully juicy and crisp pinot from one of the region's rising stars).

The other five in the top eight were the 2002 Barrymore Estate (a bright, redcurrant-tasting pinot with a rather forward, developed, smoky flavour); the 2002 Yabby Lake (youthful, bold, but a bit undeveloped and unyielding – should flesh out beautifully in the bottle); the 2001 Red Hill Estate "Classic Reserve" (savoury-smelling but concentrated and silky in the mouth); the 2001 Kooyong (very tight, firm and restrained); and the 2002 Box Stallion (upfront, oaky and a little in that prune-y mould).

As with all such tastings, there were also some pinots I rather liked that didn't make it through the judges' points-tallying and discussion: the 2002 Eldridge Estate of Red Hill (winemaker David Lloyd has put a lot of work in over the past couple of vintages and his wines are getting better and better – this is a bold, fleshy pinot); the 2001 HPR (soft, silky and seductive); and the 2002 Darling Park (quite atypical – more like shiraz, really, with bold spicy aromas and fairly butch tannins – but balanced).

Visit the association's Web site – www.mpva.com.au – and click on "events" for more info on the 2005 Pinot Celebration, or "wineries" for contact details for most of the producers I've mentioned here. ○

THE FULL BOTTLE

2002 Chalice Bridge Shiraz Cabernet \$28

I have no idea what's going on with the label of this Margaret River red (a sea-dragon eating its own tail ... hmmm), but I like the wine: spicy, undergrowthy, elegant and juicy. The 2002 Shiraz (\$22) is good, too, with even funkier cracked pepper characters. For stockist info, contact admin@chalicebridge.com.au or phone (08) 9388 6088.

