



Good mornington shiraz

Wine lovers are warming to the cooler-climate shirazes. The distinctive drops coming out of Victoria's Mornington Peninsula prove why

TEXT SALLY GUDGEON

AUSTRALIANS ARE NOT SLOW TO SING THE PRAISES of shiraz. It is as much a part of our national identity as Waltzing Matilda. We love the big, gutsy and ripe warm-climate styles, but are increasingly growing fond of the subtlety and elegance of wines from cooler areas, too. The Mornington Peninsula is one such region. It is noted for the quality of its pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot gris, but not shiraz. In the enthusiasm to match specific grapes to specific wine regions, has the viability of some varieties been overlooked? Is Mornington shiraz one of the great unsung heroes?

George Kefford planted the first shiraz on the Mornington Peninsula at Merricks Estate in 1978. At the time, the only other vineyards on the peninsula were Main Ridge and Elgee Park. His was the first of many Mornington shirazes to do well on the show circuit. Paringa Estate, Turramurra Estate and, more recently, Box Stallion have an exceptional show record. Lindsay McCall, of Paringa Estate, is particularly proud of the trophy his 1993 Shiraz won in the Australia vs South Africa Wine Challenge, where it beat Grange and Hill of Grace.

Shiraz lives on a knife-edge on the Mornington. Maybe for this reason it has always had its detractors. Many producers who have had negative experiences with the variety – green and underripe wines – have grafted over it with more popular varieties. Shiraz does not perform well in the region if it is planted in the wrong site, if cropping levels are too high or if the wrong viticultural techniques are used, leading to vines becoming out of balance.

Where shiraz thrives on the Mornington, however, it sings. And when it sings, it does so with a pure voice humming with notes of white pepper and spice. It is often likened to a northern Rhône-style wine owing to its distinctive perfume, sophisticated structure and supple, silky tannins. Rather than being an unsung hero, some would argue it's a well-kept secret. Many echo the comment of Frank Osborn, of Osborns: "People often ask for shiraz at cellar door, and we have no problems selling it."

For the variety to do well, it needs a sheltered, north-facing position with a trellising system that allows air and light to penetrate effectively. It also seems to prefer lower altitudes. McCall controls the variety's triffid-like tendencies by using the lyre trellising system. Other growers have had success in opening up the

canopy by using Scott Henry or the vertical shoot positioning (VSP) method. Cropping levels need to be kept between two and three tonnes per 0.4 hectare, depending on the year.

As McCall points out, in the Mornington's marginal climate, shiraz has more chance of success than cabernet sauvignon if grown on the right site. This is because it will still produce a very drinkable, if lighter, style of wine in cooler years when Baumé levels are lower.

While Mornington shiraz does have a regional style, or *typicité*, it is individual sites that give some unique and exciting characteristics. The Scorpo vineyard is one such site. Sandro Mosele, winemaker at Kooyong (now under the same ownership as Port Phillip Estate), makes the Scorpo wines. He was not enthusiastic about Mornington shiraz until he saw the quality of fruit coming from the Scorpo property. The vineyard, although at a lower altitude to the Port Phillip site, is only about one kilometre away and has a similar volcanic soil structure. The wines are made in the same way, too, yet the different sites produce markedly different results. The Scorpo shiraz is earthy and European in style, with the silky-supple tannins of a Brunello or maybe a Cornas. But there's no doubting the origin of the Port Phillip shiraz; it has the vibrant, dark berry fruit underscored with pepper that is so delightfully distinctive of the region.

Even with a good site, the exceptional shiraz vintages on the Mornington are hot, drought years with a long ripening season: 1993, 1997, 2000, 2003. Kefford makes the point that any delays in pruning shiraz can curtail the crucial ripening period. It is usually the last variety to be picked, and judging the right time to do this before the weather breaks is a gamble.

One way of modifying the effects of a difficult year is to add some viognier to shiraz, a common practice in the Rhône Valley. Sandro Mosele grows some in the Port Phillip vineyard. "It's my insurance policy for the leaner years," he says. "A small touch of viognier will lift the aromatics of shiraz and cover any green characters, making a richer, riper wine."

When it comes to making shiraz, McCall says, "I make it exactly the same way as my pinot," and indeed, shiraz does lend itself to similar winemaking techniques. Some producers still age the wine predominantly in American oak – Merricks Estate is one – but the tendency in recent years has been to use a mix of old and new French oak. While American oak boosts the mid-palate sweetness, many winemakers prefer the subtlety of French oak because it accentuates the delicate fruit and aromatics.

So, will the unsung hero finally be given an anthem? Rollo Crittenden, of Dromana Estate, thinks the future is bright for shiraz on the Mornington. "Many of the early plantings are reaching maturity and are producing better fruit," he says. "We now know the right sites, and we have greater knowledge and expertise." While it will remain a comparative rarity, because it is so site specific, Kefford's prophecy, "shiraz is what the peninsula will be noted for one day", may not be so far away.

local heroes

2003 Box Stallion Shiraz, A\$27

The 2003 follows on from Box Stallion's multi-awarded, first-release 2001. It's another blockbuster – highly aromatic, with black cherry/pepper/spice, plenty of mid-palate juiciness, well-integrated oak and firm tannins.

2001 Elan Vineyard Shiraz, A\$20

Selma Lowther is a one-woman band. She is both vigneron and winemaker and makes tiny quantities of this exquisite shiraz (of which she only has 0.2 hectare), which has notes of mulberry/plum/black pepper and slippery, sensuous tannins that delight.

1999 Merricks Estate Shiraz, A\$30

This is where it all started, and it's still going strong. Gorgeous spice/pepper/anise/vanilla on the nose, with plenty of sweet fruit mid-palate and soft tannins.

2001 Moorooduc Estate Shiraz, A\$30

Rick McIntyre pioneered the use of wild yeast on the Mornington. It certainly adds an extra depth and complexity to his shiraz. Dusty black pepper/spice on the nose leads to an elegant, textured wine that flows seamlessly across the palate to a long finish.

2002 Mornington Estate Shiraz Viognier, A\$20

Few producers made any shiraz in the region in 2002 owing to a poor fruit set; Rollo Crittenden was one of the exceptions. This is from the Dromana Estate portfolio. It is highly aromatic, with plenty of bright blackberry/plum fruit and fine tannins.

2001 Osborns Shiraz, A\$20

Vibrant raspberry/plum/licorice/pepper aromas on the nose track throughout the palate. Velvety tannins frame the wine and push out the length. Ageing the wine in one- and two-year-old oak really allows the fruit to shine.

2001 Paringa Estate Shiraz, A\$42

Paringa has consistently produced high-quality shiraz, and the 2001 is no exception. It has the hallmark spice/blackberry/pepper aromas, excellent palate length and fine-grained tannins. A tasting of the 1997 shows just how well the wines age; it is magnificent, with plenty of fruit, grippy tannins and a zing of pepper to finish.

2003 Scorpo Shiraz, A\$40

The 2001 was the first release from this exceptional vineyard, and it hit the market with a bang, wowing critics and consumers alike. Unfortunately, there are only limited quantities available of the 2003, which will be released early next year. Scorpo shiraz is all about fragrance, texture and complexity. It's earthy, savoury and deeply sexy.

2000 Turramurra Estate Shiraz, A\$40

This vintage is richer and riper than the 1999, with more mulberry/plum characters, but that delicious hit of dusty white pepper, typical of this vineyard, is still there. Ripe tannins ripple through the wine to a firm finish.

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