



Adelaide Review Thursday 1/1/2004
General News Page 33
Circulation: 40,636
Size: 382.83 sq.cms.

Better alternatives

There's a big, exciting world of Australian wine beyond shiraz and chardonnay, as **Nick Stock** discovered.

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WINE shows are very much true to wine; some love them, some have them and many have no interest at all. There are now so many shows and so many entries that the logistics constantly threaten the outcomes. While committees welcome more and more entries (and their associated revenue), judges call for fewer entries, smaller classes and better dentists. The mantra has long been "improving the breed"; some will say it is more like "maintaining the order". Contentious stuff; it's a drink after all.

The Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show, held each year in Mildura, is aiming to be, well, different. The judges are not sporting dreadlocks or wearing Jimi Hendrix T-shirts – and Patchouli characters in wine are not rewarded for nostalgic reasons. Joss sticks are not burned. Most judges are generation Xers; they think of an insect when someone mentions a Beetle.

Commenced in 1999 as the Sangiovese Awards, the first event saw 27 wines entered. This expanded in 2000 to include Italian varieties; 69 entries. In 2001, the reigning event incarnation was spawned and in 2003 entries topped 300. The mission is simple: provide a forum for growers and winemakers to get feedback and unravel the mystery of new varieties in Australia. There's a sense of camaraderie and pioneering spirit often missing in the current competitive, brand-soaked cut-and-thrust of Australian wine.

Wine show entries are organized by variety, so you judge like with like. In most shows, the "other" varieties tend to end up lumped together in a catch-all class; a bunch of misfits, vinous pariahs. Judging wines of consistent variety is hard enough but to glean meaningful, consistent results from 50 wines ranging through albarino, arneis, verduzzo, viognier, garganega, roussanne, frontignac and more can be near

impossible, especially when they're scattered through a single line of glasses on a bench and there's still more than 100 wines to come after lunch. These are not deemed "important" wines and just pronouncing half of them can polarize a judging panel.

As a consequence, the Mildura show leaves the shiraz, cabernets, sauvignon blanc and chardonnay to the other events and attracts all the experimental, nouveau and sometimes cutting-edge wines – as well as the odd resilient pioneer. Each gets their own airing and a chance to be shown in varietal context.

For example, nebbiolo is so different to our idea of what red wine should be in Australia. Indeed, it is almost the antithesis, with light colour, often orange and showing tawiness, subtle fruit character, perfumed and fragrant, often more savoury than sweet, high in acid and chock full of tannin. It is cryptic and contradictory – and herein lays its ability to captivate and engage, though not in 38 seconds surrounded by purple-ripe sweet reds at a big wine show.

In Mildura, 16 nebbiolos were lined up side-by-side and swirled, sniffed and spat for almost an hour, producing five bronze medals, one silver and a gold. Conventional conditions would likely yield a lesser swag.

While judging alternative varieties, I believe it is relatively easy to pick out the best examples in a line-up. The real challenge and excitement comes when calibrating them into the broad scheme of Australian wine. Judges awarded 13 gold medals at the 2003 show and this compares fairly closely with the percentages of alternative grape styles winning medals at conventional shows.

Interestingly, pinot gris scooped four golds while the founding variety, sangiovese, produced nothing above a silver medal. Viognier, marsanne, muscat, traminer, barbera, nebbiolo and durif all

made the top grade. While such varieties may be called alternative, many of Australia's top producers make some of the stalwarts. Yalumba, Henschke, Tahbilk and d'Arenberg feature in the medals, along with lesser known newcomers such as Longview and Scorpo.

A producer with a keen and vested interest in little-known varieties would do well to make the pilgrimage to Mildura near the end of October, to taste the benchmarks or best attempts. It may confirm your theory that viognier could do really