



JUST ANOTHER MANIC MONSTER

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Despite my extensive vocabulary, “Wow, holy carp Batman” (or similar words) was all I was capable of uttering when I took the first sip from a bottle of Morris Durif Private Bin No 158 1970 recently. The bottle had a mid-shoulder wine level and the cork was saturated all the way through. It took neigh on surgical skills to remove the cork intact, so I was not hopeful that the wine would still be drinkable. Upon pouring, the colour was brown but it still had a colour density/depth that would put most 2011 vintage commercial red wines to shame.

It took a few swirls of the glass to coax aromas out of the wine, which is fair enough seeing as how they had been locked in a 1 pint 6 fluid ounces

bottle for 42 years. The bouquet was like that of a light mature Portuguese vintage port. Then the acid test – the first sip. That’s when my utterance took place. The wine was amazing – alive, vibrant, almost impossible to describe using ‘normal’ wine descriptors; it was rich, luscious, mouthfilling, hints of Bonox and some apparent sweetness with a dry finish which lingered on the back palate for ages. A truly awesome wine, which could be confidently stacked up against any other Australian red of the same age including Grange.

It was most likely wines like this one that persuaded James Halliday to list Morris Durif as the only ‘non mainstream’ or ‘alternative’ variety in his book *Classic Wines of Australia*.

When you mention Durif, those who have heard of it think of an old fashioned big red from Rutherglen that has been around forever. However Durif is in fact a new kid on the block in terms of grape varieties. Most *vitis vinifera* varieties, even those labelled here as 'alternative varieties' can be traced back down through the centuries or even millennia, but not Durif – it was a very recent creation.

In 1880 botanist Francois Durif from the University of Montpellier discovered a unique vine in a nearby vineyard, which he modestly named after himself. That vine turned out to be a cross between Peloursin and Shiraz, a case of GM (genetic modification) the natural way.

When it was proven to have high resistance to downy mildew, Durif was widely planted in several areas within the Rhône Valley, primarily to add colour and body to their blends in weaker years. However the resultant Durif wines were of poor quality which meant that it soon fell out of favour, and today it is nearly nonexistent in France.

Durif was introduced to Australia in 1908, only 28 years after its initial discovery by Victorian viticulturist Francois de Castella, who brought cuttings grafted on to American rootstocks back from France at a time when the Victorian wine industry was being disseminated by phylloxera and was busily replanting using grafted vines.

These cuttings were propagated at the Rutherglen Viticultural Research Station and issued throughout that region. While it was later phased out from many of the vineyards in the area, there were some who persevered with it. For those that did persevere, the variety went on to become the area's signature wine, producing big dark, inky coloured wines with a plummy, firm texture and mouthfeel, which are known for their cellaring ability as well as their rich and powerful flavours. A young Durif is a *big* wine, with its high alcohol, dark, dense, almost black colour, and huge mouthful of flavour. These attributes led to a friend of mine once describing young Durif as being "a liquid steak in every glass". Thus those who enjoy big monster wines will enjoy Durif in its youth. However those who prefer a slick, elegant and sophisticated full bodied wine would be well advised to tuck a few bottles of Durif away for a while. The perennial question of "how long do I keep it?" is almost irrelevant in this case as Durif will last longer than just about any other variety

with the possible exception of Tannat. Properly cellared, a Rutherglen Durif will reward the drinker at anywhere between 15 to 50 years of age.

In a residence without a cellar, Rutherglen Durif is still worth tucking away for a while in a dark cupboard or even in an Australia Post foam wine box under the desk. Given three to five years in this environment the wine will evolve from a brutish youngster to a more sophisticated, smoother wine which will give great pleasure, especially if it accompanies a hearty meal.

Durif has also been used extensively over the years in Rutherglen's fortified wines, and more recently in sparkling wines such as the Morris Sparkling Shiraz Durif. Today there are 84 wineries making Durif in Australia in areas as diverse as the Granite Belt, coastal Queensland, Mudgee, King Valley, Mornington Peninsula, Barossa Valley, Langhorne Creek, Riverina, Riverland, Sunraysia and Perth Hills.

I have yet to try any examples from the cooler climates such as Mornington and King Valley where I suspect that without masses of TLC the wine could end up being a bit green and acidic in character as this variety really loves the sun and heat.

Durif is also grown in reasonable quantities in America where it is usually called Petite Sirah as well as in small quantities in Israel, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Mexico, however its spiritual home is definitively Rutherglen where it has been making outstanding wines for nigh on a century.

Apart from the iconic Rutherglen long term cellaring examples such as Morris, Campbell's The Barkly, Buller's, Stanton & Killeen's Moodemere and Rutherglen Estate, I would also recommend the Rusticana Langhorne Creek Durif and in a more contemporary and slightly lighter style – i.e. ready to drink earlier – the examples made by Kingston Estate and the De Bortoli Deen Vat 1 Durif, which are widely available and ready to drink, are very good wines.

I have one bottle of Morris 1969 Durif tucked away, which I plan to open on its 50th birthday – I can't wait. So for those of you who haven't tried this amazing variety yet, do yourselves and your palate a favour, seek out a bottle. Young or old, Durif makes outstanding wine.

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