

# Poor old Petit Verdot



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**P**oor old Petit Verdot – misnamed, misplanted, mistreated and misunderstood. Petit Verdot is rightly named after its berries – “small green”. However, it’s misnamed because when you say the name, most people think of a ‘small’ wine that is soft and gentle; after all *petit* means small and delicate in French. In fact, the opposite is true; the wine is big with its deep dark brooding colour, pungent aromas of brambly fruits and blackberries, a mass of rich mouthfilling flavours and a big, long, tannic finish. There is nothing *petit* about this wine.

Petit Verdot comes from Bordeaux where it is one of only five varieties approved to be grown in the area. If one was to plant any ‘unauthorised’ varieties, one would be jailed, the vine ripped out, and one would probably be burnt at the stake for being such an heretic. Its exact origins are unknown but they are suspected to be further south, closer to the Mediterranean in warmer climates where its fruit could fully ripen.

Petit Verdot has fallen out of favour in Bordeaux due to its late ripening, which means that in many vintages the growers cannot get it fully ripe before the end of the season. If it were planted in the warmer parts of southern France it would be a much more reliable producer and have the ability to make some excellent wines rather than being a small time add-in to the clarets of Bordeaux.

Where it is still grown in Bordeaux, such as at Chateau Palmer (3rd Growth) it is done so to add backbone to the mid palate of the Cabernet predominant blends. It adds body weight, depth of colour and tannin to the blend, which in lesser years can make a substantial difference to the quality of the resultant wine.

In Australia, Petit Verdot was originally planted in

cooler areas such as Coonawarra, but it has taken a real shine to our warmer regions and produced some stunning wines such as the Kingston Estate 1998 Reserve Petit Verdot, which ranks as one of the best varietal Petit Verdots ever made in this country. Another excellent example is the Petit Verdots of Pirramimma, which year after year deliver *big* bags of flavour in a rich and powerful but smooth wine. The 1997 Pirramimma Petit Verdot is just hitting its peak at the moment but alas I have no more left in my cellar, likewise with the Ballast Stone 2001 Petit Verdot, which was another great example of finding the right balance of tannins to make a superb wine.

Unfortunately too many Australian winemakers only know how to make a red wine two ways – like a Shiraz or a Cabernet. They do not treat each different variety in the manner that that particular variety needs or deserves to be treated, which is why many early attempts at ‘alternative varieties’ are flops or at best ordinary wines. If you don’t think I am right, go back a few years to remember what the earlier Australian Sangiovese wines were like; mainly thin and far too tannic. It took the likes of Coriole and one or two others to show people what great wines the variety could really produce here in Australia.

Few winemakers have seen the light with Petit Verdot as yet, because over the past seven years that I have been attending the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show in Mildura, I have watched, with great sadness, the Petit Verdot class slowly slide downhill. Today there is less than half the numbers of entries in the Petit Verdot class that there were a few years ago, and many of the wines that are entered have seen the variety mistreated. Petit Verdot has plenty of in-built tannin, yet many winemakers insist on whacking considerable amounts of oak into their wine so that the finished product is almost

capable of making you go cross-eyed as your cheeks are sucked together by the masses of tannin in the wine. This is such a shame as, properly handled, the variety has a lot to offer wine drinkers – big rich mouthfilling flavours with a long lingering finish which makes the palate yearn for more.

While statistics are sketchy I suspect that most of the Petit Verdot grown in Australia is now being used ‘ala Bordeaux’ as a booster and body builder for other varietal wines which are either lacking in body or have the typical Cabernet doughnut hole on the mid palate. While there is no question this is a reasonable and bona fide use for the variety, it is a shame there are not more winemakers making good varietal Petit Verdot such as the De Bortoli Deen Vat 4, which is ready to drink and full of rich dark fruit, full flavoured with well integrated oak and lingering mouthfilling flavour.

Petit Verdot is also grown in very small quantities in Argentina, Chile, Italy and the USA and there is even a winery producing a varietal Petit Verdot in Venezuela. However by far its main home is now Australia, which has more than four times the acreage of Petit Verdot than what its native France has.

One would think this would give us the opportunity to promote this wine as a uniquely Australian varietal wine as we produce at least three quarters, if not more, of the world’s supply of varietal Petit Verdot wine. Unfortunately we should be calling the variety Pity Verdot, because it is misunderstood or ignored by consumers due to its having been mishandled by winemakers and is slowly slipping into oblivion. There are no attempts by quality producers to band together and promote the variety to Australian wine drinkers, let alone the rest of the world. This is a shame because a well made Petit Verdot is a truly classy wine which deserves much better recognition.



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