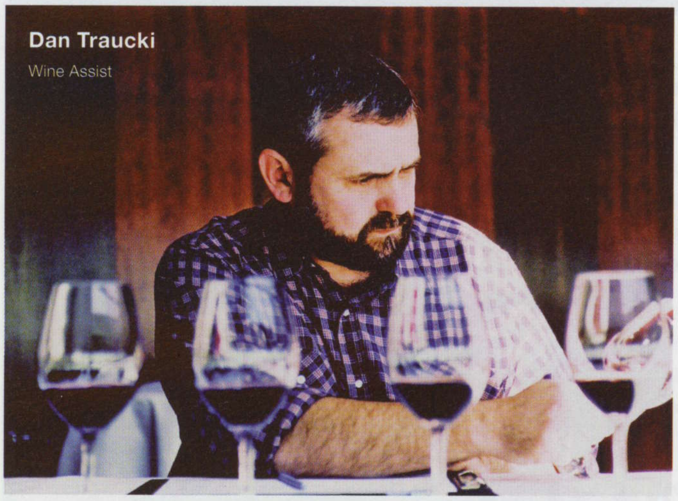
Australia's future lies in alternative wines


Dan Traucki
Wine Assist

For some time now, Australia has been leading the world in experimenting with 'new' winegrape varieties, albeit on a very individualistic and ad hoc basis. We have taken varieties which have been either struggling against extinction or anonymity in their country of origin and created reasonable to great wines; for example, Petit Verdot and Viognier.

In the past decade, a number of new varieties have appeared on the radar of many Australian wine drinkers, such as Pinot Grigio/Gris, Viognier, Petit Verdot and Sangiovese, while at the same time Sauvignon Blanc has gone from being a niche wine to being a serious contender to Chardonnay, especially in the on-premise trade.

I believe the Australian wine industry is at a very significant crossroad – we can be dinosaurs and go down the French road of 'same old, same old', spending ever-increasing funds on persuading a decreasing number of people to buy our wines, or we can take the evolutionary high road by starting to create new and exciting alternatives to offer both the millions of existing wine drinkers and the hundreds of millions of new potential wine drinkers, thereby creating new long-term sustainable markets for our produce.

A small band of winemakers called the Riverland Alternative Growers' Association has started to take steps in this direction. Midway through 2008, the association held a seminar discussing several European varieties that appear to be quite suited to grow in the Riverland. Focussing on Italian and Spanish varieties, the RAGA compared the climatic conditions in the country of origin to those in the Riverland to show their suitability, and then conducted a tasting of several varieties, comparing 'native' wines to ones made in Australia. A great example of the potential of this direction is 919 Wines in Berri whose portfolio includes seven table wines, of which only one (Shiraz) is a traditional variety. The rest are alternative varieties – excellent wines selling at handsome prices.

When I joined the wine industry in the late 1980s, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay were all the rage (green and over-oaked, respectively). Most Shiraz was still being labelled 'Hermitage', including Penfolds Grange i.e. Shiraz was totally underrated and undervalued. Jim Irvine and Tollana were about the only producers making a straight varietal Merlot. Sauvignon Blanc (when you could get it) was that strange stuff Cloudy Bay made over in New Zealand, and the only alternative variety wines – which were available in Sydney bottle shops – you could get were Chateau Tahbilk's Marsanne in whites and either Carlo Corino's Montrose Sangiovese and Barbera or Rutherglen Durif in reds.

While during this time we have made considerable evolutionary progress as an industry, which places us in a much better position than many of our rivals, we are – in my opinion – in the early stages of the next phase of our evolution.

I believe the Australian wine industry's long-term global viability, while underpinned by the stunning Shiraz we make, will be made significantly stronger and more secure by offering new and exciting wines. Wine consumers of the world took to Australian wines in the first place because we offered something different, flavourful, exciting and affordable. We are constantly told that generations X and Y are less risk averse and more adventurous, therefore we should be working towards offering them the excitement and great flavour of new and different wines.

The main reason for decline in wine consumption in France is that the younger generation perceive wine as the beverage of their parents, and so they have turned to other types of alcohol – mainly beer and ready-to-drink beverages. This trend is also evident in other countries, but it does not have to become a major challenge to the Australian wine industry. In some places, the younger generation is turning to different wines (where they are available) rather than different forms of alcohol. Many younger consumers are drinking Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris/Grigio and Viognier because they see Chardonnay as an 'oldies' drink, therefore there is the opportunity to engender wine drinking to the next generation, provided they are offered alternatives to what their parents drink. The beer industry has recently done this quite successfully with a plethora of new products aimed at the younger generation (Blonde, Extra Dry, etc), which despite all the hype and glitz, are still – after all – beer.

The Australian wine industry is currently making its first serious attempt to steer alco-pop drinkers across to wine with Moscato. It will be interesting to follow its progress during the next couple of years. If it works, it will eventually lead those converts to look at other less sweet wines to try as their palates develop. But what are they most likely to choose as the next step in their wine adventure? Will they go straight to big, blockbuster high-alcohol wines such as a Barossa Shiraz, or are they more likely to go to lighter style, full-flavoured wines such as Tempranillo?

During the next few years, I think Savagnin and Fiano will become popular with white wine drinkers and close the gap to mainstream varieties, while Tempranillo will continue to grow in popularity in the reds, especially as more winemakers come to grips with how to handle the variety properly, rather than make it just like any other Australian dry red.

Another variety which holds great promise if made well is Tannat from Madiran in southern France. It has massive colour and depth of flavour but can be overly tannic if not handled well by the winemaker. A good Australian example of this variety is the Pirramimma 2004 McLaren Vale Tannat, which needs plenty of breathing to show its best.

Saperavi from the country of Georgia is another variety showing great promise in Australia. It has an absolutely massive black/purple colour which stains the glass, along with great gobs of fruit flavours, and when delicately handled finishes elegantly without excessive tannins. A good example of this variety is the Patritti Wines 2008 Barossa Saperavi.

In summary, I believe the Australian wine industry is at a major crossroad – we can either go down the French route and risk becoming dinosaurs or we can go down the alternative route and enhance our relevance to the wine drinking world during the next decade or two. Given the rapid rise in wine consumption in Asia and the current financial decline of the United States and Europe, I'll back the alternative route as the being the best path towards a long-term healthy and meaningful Australian wine industry. ■