

Blends tipped to lead alternative variety charge



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In recent years, an increasing number of Australian grapegrowers and winemakers have been experimenting with 'new' winegrape varieties. There are hundreds of different grape varieties grown around the world that are not deemed to be 'classic' varieties such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Merlot. Some of these 'alternative' varieties have the potential to produce premium quality wines of unique and interesting characteristics.

For many years, Australia's more progressive wine producers have been experimenting to see which of these alternative varieties work best in their particular microclimate. Most recently, the Riverland Alternative Wine Group was established, and it held its first seminar to assist growers in the selection of suitable alternative varieties to plant in the Riverland region.

Early in November each year, the inquisitive of the wine industry gather in Mildura at the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show to examine and appraise the latest crop of wines made from alternative grape varieties.

Stefano de Pieri and Bruce Chalmers started the Sangiovese

Awards in 1999, which over time has developed and become the AAVWS. In the decade since they started the event, it has grown from a few entries up to 619 this year. In that same time, industry has seen varieties such as Viognier, Pinot Gris and Tempranillo reach the Australian wine drinking public's repertoire.

This year there were four Pinot Gris/Grigio classes, which were divided by style as well as vintage. The first two were for Pinot Gris/Grigio made in the 'dry, crisp and nutty' style (current vintage and older classes); the second two being for wines that were 'rich and full bodied'(current vintage and older classes). There were six gold medals awarded out of the 95 wines entered, with both Redbank Long Paddock 2009 entries winning gold.

This year the judges were slightly more critical of the two Viognier classes, with some of the younger wines lacking varietal character and many of the older wines showing too much oak.

For the fourth year in a row, the Tahbilk Marsanne – in this case the 2008 – won a gold medal, showing the great consistency of this excellent wine. While there were no gold medals awarded in the



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Winemaking-alternatives-dt-dec09 – Early in November each year, the inquisitive of the wine industry gather in Mildura at the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show to examine and appraise the latest crop of wines made from alternative grape varieties.

Savagnin class, it was a consistent and strong class with the judges remarking that “the variety continues to show its strength regardless of what it is called”. Likewise, the higher pointed wines in the Vermentino and Fiano classes also showed that these two varieties potentially have a great future in Australia, especially with the trophy for Best White Wine of Show going to the Beach Road Fiano, which became the first Fiano to win a trophy at the show.

In the red classes, the largest number of entries were in the Tempranillo classes, which for the first time outnumbered the Sangiovese classes. The Tempranillos also outshone the Sangioveses by winning five gold medals compared with two. The judges were pleased with the Tempranillos, with just more than half the entries in the 2008/09 class receiving medals or commendations, and the judges’ notes saying “Great class to judge; exciting to see Tempranillo coming along so well; great diversity of styles.”

In the Nebbiolo class, last year SC Pannel Wines won gold with its 2006 Nebbiolo; this year the company won three trophies, including Best Wine of Show with its sensational 2007 Nebbiolo.

The two Petit Verdot classes continue to be very small, despite the significant volume of grapes grown in Australia. However, the standard was better than the past two years, with less overly tannic wines being presented.

In the Durif class, eight out of the 12 entrants achieved medals, including the All Saints Estate 2007 Family Cellar Durif, and the Rusticana 2007 Langhorne Creek Durif, which won gold medals.

The Zinfandel class with 18 entries was less consistent than in previous years. While the top wine Vincognita Wines 2008 Primitivo was awarded a gold medal, some wines were not good expressions of the variety.

The two most exciting classes to me were 24 (other medium bodied varieties and blends) and 25 (other full-bodied varieties and blends), where there were a myriad of different varieties, and more significant blends made from a number of varieties. I am convinced that the future of many alternative red varieties will be in blends rather than straight varieties.

While excellent varietal wines such as the Brown Brothers 2008 Graciano (gold), Rimfire 2005 Touriga Nacional (gold) and G Patriitti & Co 2008 Saperavi (silver) will carve out a niche for themselves in this cluttered wine world, I am sure that it is the blends, such as the Heartland Wines Dolcetto and Lagrein, Cassella Black Stump Durif Shiraz and Jacob’s Creek Limited Release Lagrein Dolcetta, which will make a bigger and longer lasting impact on the wine drinking public. The blend option allows winemakers to have greater consistency from vintage to vintage, and they are therefore less likely to disappoint/confuse their customers from year to year.

It was also interesting to see that Pernod Ricard has been dabbling in alternatives, entering under the Jacob’s Creek Limited release label both a Tannat and a Graciano, as well as the Dolcetto Lagrein.

An excellent new addition to this year’s event is that the AAVWS website (www.aavws.com.au) has a separate page for each wine entered, showing a considerable amount of information (depending on how much was supplied by the entrant) on both the viticultural and winemaking practices used in creating that particular wine.

Wines made from alternative varieties have made significant progress in the past decade. The question is: ‘Which alternative varieties will come to the forefront next, and what impact will they have on Australia’s wine drinking habits?’

It will be interesting in the next 10 years to see which names become as well-known as Pinot Gris, Viognier, Sangiovese and Tempranillo have this past decade. My tips last year were Albarino, Fiano, Tannat and Saperavi. This year I am punting for Savagnin, Fiano, Vermentino, Tannat and Saperavi.

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