

Future of alternatives is in blends



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Albarino and Fiano are emerging as varieties to watch, but Petit Verdot as a straight varietal is on the decline, according to Dan Traucki who visited the 2008 Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show in Mildura.

Someone once said “Variety is the spice of life” this is certainly true of wines. In recent years, more and more Australian grapegrowers and winemakers have been experimenting with ‘new’ grape varieties. There are countless different grape varieties grown around the world, not all of which are suitable for producing premium quality wines and progressive winemakers are continually experimenting to see which varieties suit their micro climate.

Early in November each year, an inquisitive bunch of wine industry folk gather in Mildura to examine and appraise the latest crop of wines made from non-mainstream or alternative grape varieties.

In 1999 when Stefano de Pieri and Bruce Chalmers started the Sangiovese Awards which have developed to become the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show, the few alternative varieties most people in the wine industry had heard about were some of the Italian varieties such as Sangiovese and Nebbiolo. In less than a decade we have seen the emergence of varieties such as Viognier, Pinot Gris and Tempranillo into the Australian wine drinking public’s cognisance.

The 2008 Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show had 581 entries, down slightly from the 626 in 2007, with the Mayford 2006 Tempranillo taking out three trophies



Tasting and judging at the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show.

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including best wine of the show. Tempranillo entries were strong this time, with 43 entries over the two classes, divided into 2007/2008 vintage and 2006 and older. The older class being considerably the better one with wines having had more time to settle down and become more complex. The judges commented that many of the wines in the 2007/2008 class had good fruit but were over-oaked. It will be interesting to see these wines again in 12 months time at the next show, to see if they develop like their predecessors have.

Other winners were Tahbilk 2004 Marsanne which won the trophy for best white wine of the show as well as the trophy for best commercial volume. The trophy for the best Italian varietal was taken out jointly by the Dal Zotto Arneis for the white wine and the David Hooks 2006 Barbera for the red wine.

Pinot Grigio has the numbers

By far the largest numbers of entries were the 93 wines entered in the four Pinot Grigio classes, with gold medals going to Trentham, Taltarni, Yarra Burn and Hentschke. This was followed by the 64 entries in the two Viognier classes where the gold medals were won by Haan Wines Hanenhof 2008 Viognier and Geddes Seldon Inn 2008 Viognier.

One of the positives in the main white wine classes was the increasing number of Albarino and Fiano wines entered. Whilst there weren't many medals handed out for these two varieties by the judges, their progress is exciting and these are two varieties to watch with great interest over the next few years, in my opinion.

In the red classes the largest number of entries was for Sangiovese. Again like with the Tempranillo the older class - 2006 and older significantly outperformed the 2007/2008 class - two gold medals to nil.

The Nebbiolo class had 22 entries, of which the gold medal-winning S.C. Pannell Adelaide Hills 2006 Nebbiolo was a stunning wine.

One of the low points of the show was the decline of Petit Verdot, not only were the number of entries down by more than 50% from the 2005 Show to a mere 14 entries, but also across the two classes, the judges only awarded two bronze medals and commented "Petit Verdot's strength is as a blending component". By comparison the Lagrein Class had three bronze medal winners out of nine entries.

In the Durif class 10 out of the 20 entrants achieved bronze medals and two achieved silver medals. In my opinion the wines from De Bortoli, 919 Wines, Rutherglen Estate and Morris are showing the way forward.

Again the Zinfandel class with 15 entries was strong and showing much progress in the handling of this variety other than one or two overly sweet wines.

The two most exciting classes to me were 19 (other medium-bodied varieties and blends) and 20 (other full-bodied varieties and blends) where there were a plethora of different varieties and more significantly blends made from a number of varieties. I am convinced that the future of alternative variety reds is destined to be in blends rather than straight varietals.

Whilst good-great varietal wines such as the Brown Bros Carmenere, Rimfire Touriga National, Symphonia Tannat and Hugh Hamilton 'The Oddball' Saperavi will carve out a niche for themselves in this crowded wine world, I am convinced that it is the blends such as Heartland Wines Dolcetto & Lagrein; Pindarrie 'Bar Rossa' Tempranillo/ Grenache/Shiraz; Symphonia Wines Quintus Saperavi/ Temp/Tannat/Merlot/Cab & Yalumba Hand Picked Tempranillo/ Grenache Viognier which will make a bigger and longer-lasting impact on the wine-drinking public. The blend option allows the winemaker to have greater consistency from vintage to vintage and they are therefore less likely to disappoint/confuse their customers.

Wines made from alternative varieties have made much progress in the last decade. The question is, which alternative varieties will come to the forefront in the next decade?

It will be interesting to watch the progress over the next 10 years and see which names become as well known as Pinot Gris, Viognier, Sangiovese and Tempranillo have become over this decade. My tips are Albarino, Fiano, Tannat and Saperavi.

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