

Where to next?



By Dan Traucki
Wine Assist

Sections of the British press have sounded early warning bells for the Australian wine industry. They are becoming more vocal in criticising the “sameness” of our wines.

In my opinion, they are right, but they are wrong.

It is not the “sameness” that is the future threat to our industry’s global march. There is plenty of variation within any given variety, from winery to winery and region to region. In fact, there is massive diversity, especially as one goes up through the price brackets. The fact that most Australian wine consumed in Britain is in the bottom price brackets, where there is the least variance, is an issue that our industry is already tackling.

The issue will be more one of style and variety of style. Australian red wines have been slowly creeping up in alcohol over the last 10 to 15 years, and they have, correspondingly been growing in size and power. Today elegant 12-12.5% alcohol Australian red wines are a rarity. Many winemakers jam as much fruit, oak and alcohol as they can into their reds in pursuit of Parker points and US market approval.

If we continue down this path of building monster wines, and I have heard of plenty of

16%+ alcohol wines out of vintage 2005, we risk becoming irrelevant to the great majority of the world’s wine drinkers.

The percentage of wine drinkers in the world who want to drink blockbuster monster wines is minute. Admittedly it is an affluent minority, but given the current red wine surplus, it’s about time we started practicing vinous multiculturalism. We are in the early stages of practicing vinous multiculturalism in terms of wine varieties, but more importantly we need to do so in terms of wine styles. We live in a warm to hot country, yet we work towards making ever-bigger red wines, which are much more suited to be consumed in cold climates.

Australia has made excellent progress in increasing the number of varieties and styles of white wines over the last 10-15 years. Fifteen years ago, we had: Chardonnay, more oaked Chardonnay, massively oaked

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Chardonnay and a few radical souls drinking Riesling and Semillon.

Today we have plenty of unoaked Chardonnays that are worth drinking, our Rieslings are impressing the world, we have Viognier, Pinot Gris and Grigio, and we even make a fair Sauvignon Blanc. These varietals, along with a number of blends which include the likes of Marsanne and Rousanne, are gaining momentum and broadening the style portfolio that we offer the world's wine drinkers.

The largest proportion of wine drinkers and potential wine drinkers in the world don't want to drink vinous behemoths, they want to drink wines that complement their climate, lifestyle and food style. Our broad spectrum of white wines now offers that to them.

If we want to keep our industry viable and vital we need to significantly increase our export. So why do we persist in making big reds and even bigger reds from the usual suspects? Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon. The only real addition to our repertoire of late has been Petit Verdot, another monster red!

These are not the style of wines that most of the world wants to drink. Just like in Australia, the rest of the world wants a smooth easy drinking wine that complements their meal or can be drunk socially with friends, without in depth analysis of the wine. More and more often I hear overseas people saying that Australian wine is "too hard" (high in tannins). This is especially so from our Asian neighbours who, over time, will potentially become our largest market.

At the Sydney Fine Food & Wine Show in September, the wine and spirits pavilion was filled with a plethora of small wineries and spirit importers trying to gain presence and visibility, some mid-sized players and the ubiquitous Yellow Tail.

Interestingly, the ninety odd exhibitors in the pavilion included a New Zealand stand showing 12 different New Zealand wineries, a Chilean stand, a Rhone (France) stand, an Italian stand, a Spanish stand and a Greek stand. Among these foreigners there were some real revelations and hints of what we need to do to secure our future.

The highlights were:

On the Chilean stand, the "Natas de Guarda" a 2002 Carmenere. This is long lost grape variety that originated from France, and was confused for Merlot for most of the last century. Probably the best way to describe it is as a top shelf Cabernet Merlot all in the one variety. This variety is garnering much interest and publicity for the Chilean wine industry.

The Rhone stand, under the guidance of Olivier Debarge, had 20 different wine imported by seven distributors. While I didn't taste them all, there was a common theme among those that I did taste. They were lighter and brighter wines, crisp, with masses of flavour, and a slightly savoury finish. Ideal for our summer conditions, not at all insipid and lacklustre. They were medium bodied but full flavoured and lower in alcohol. I was especially impressed by the wines of Cave de Tain and Maison Chapoutier, whose La Sizeranne Hermitage is simply sensational.

The biggest eye-openers of the show, however, were the Greek wines. Tasting through the Katogi- Strofilia range of red wines with Maria Dimou, their PR manager who flew in from Athens for this show, I found that their Fresco Averoff red, which is made from Agiorgitiko and aimed at UK supermarkets, was very much like a Riverland Cabernet Shiraz. Moving up to their Katogi Averoff Red, which is a Cabernet/Agiorgitiko blend, the colour was rather light, but the wine was mid-bodied with great aromatic characters and a velvety finish. The final wine was a real revelation, the Xinomavro looked light brick-brown in colour, like an aged Pinot, when poured into the glass, but it had a huge bouquet of red berries, which bubbled out of the glass to assail the senses. On the palate the wine is tight and sinuous with

lashing of berry flavour and fine grippy tannins. It is a stunning wine and from memory, only 13.0% alcohol.

The whole point of this article is that as an industry we need to look beyond Parker Points and blockbusters for a small portion of the US market, and look at creating wines of style and elegance that will beguile the world's wine drinkers rather than bashing them over the head with a piece of 4"X2".

Can you remember the massively oaked Chardonnays of the mid eighties? Luckily most of them have gone the way of the Dinosaur. Over time more and more people started drinking unoaked or lightly oaked Chardonnay where the oak complimented the fruit flavours rather than drowned them.

We have learned the lesson that "more/bigger isn't necessarily better" with whites, so why is it that we seem incapable of learning it with reds.

The recent rise in sales of Rose, now that most producers have backed off the residual sugar, should give the industry a strong hint that there is a poultice of people out there who drink for flavour and food compatibility rather than to have their palates, battered and bruised.

If a further example were to be needed, what better one could we have than the creation of a whole new category of red wine in the last few years, that of Shiraz Viognier. Originating from Cote-Rotie in Rhone, this blend has taken off big time here in Australia. Why? Because the addition of some Viognier to Shiraz helps to enhance the wine by making it more aromatic, a tad lighter in style and better balanced, in other words a more consumer friendly wine.

Over the next few years the catch cry of Australian reds should become: Grace, elegance, poise and sophistication, instead of raw power and brute strength. This concept if adopted will, in my opinion, ensure "Wine Brand Australia" a long reign as the school captain of the global wine industry. Keep going the way we are currently and we risk ending up as the school bully- short-term gain for long term oblivion.

So, let's take a lesson from the "old world" and put away your sumo wrestlers and bring out your gymnasts/athletes!

Angove's turnover milestone and **historic export deal**

Angove's has signed an historic export deal with the United States expected to boost its turnover by 20%.

The deal recently signed in Honolulu with the fifth largest winery in the United States, Trincherro Family Estates, comes as Angove's announced a record annual sales result on the back of a strong export performance.

The United States is already a significant export market for Angove's but with a major partnership now in place with Trincherro the potential for greater market penetration and sustained growth than in the past is very real.

Sales in the last year to the US have grown 400% as a result of Angove's initial trade with Trincherro.

For the 12 months to 31 August, 2005, Angove's recorded total sales of \$51.5 million, up from \$46 million the previous year, and at a time when the Australian wine industry is facing significant challenges.

The domestic market remained steady despite an increasingly competitive environment.

In the 12 months to 31 August, 2005, Angove's recorded a 20% increase in wine exported to Asia and Europe. Domestically, Queensland was the fastest growing state for Angove's, with sales growing at 9%.