

# Talking up tannins and Tannat



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As Australia has no native *Vitis vinifera*, every winegrape variety grown here has been a “new” variety at some point in time between 1778 and today.

In recent years the Australian wine industry has started to cast its gaze beyond the traditional “noble” varieties to see which of the thousands of varieties around the world will thrive in our viticultural conditions and produce wine of quality.

One example of this is Petit Verdot, where in the space of 20 short years, we have gone from near zero, to having the most plantings in the world. More recently we have seen Viognier become a new rising star in the Australian wine firmament. We probably now have more Viognier acreage in Australia than in its native France.

There are a number of wineries, mainly boutique producers and the King Valley’s Brown Brothers, which are “experimenting” with new varieties to see what these deliver. Many of these varieties you may not have heard about before,

like Lost Valley’s ‘Cortese’, which is a fabulous white wine I first tasted at last year’s Wine Australia.

One such “new” variety, said to originate from the Basque area of Spain, is Tannat, which is the main variety in the huge red wines of Madiran, south-western France’s most famous red wine. There are approximately 3000 hectares of Tannat planted in France. This thick-skinned variety, with its high level of tannins, produces deep-coloured wines with great structure. Madiran wines made from 100% Tannat are monstrous brutes, which need at least a decade before the tannins are subdued enough for mortals to drink. Typically these wines are very rich, full-bodied, built around a strong tannic backbone, with chocolate/leather fruit flavours, and a long spicy finish. These black-as-ink wines tend to live forever.

In more recent times Madiran producers have been adding Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Franc, as a softener to Tannat, in order to make wines, which are more approachable in their

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youth. These wines, which typically are blended with 60% to 80% Tannat, are still big dense, dark wines, but they are approachable when young. I'll describe them as "manna from heaven" for fans of BIG reds: masses of fruit complemented by thick textures, and stunning in their youth.

Tannat is also the main red grape variety of Uruguay in South America, where in this warmer climate it produces wines softer and less brutish than those of Madiran. There the variety is often called Harriague after Don Pascal Harriague who first introduced it to Uruguay in the 1870s. Uruguay, just across the wide mouth of the River Plate from Argentina, has some 300 wineries with approximately 10,000 hectares under vine, 30% of which is Tannat. The population of around 3.4 million people, consuming an average of 27 litres of wine per person per annum, account for most of the wine produced.

Tannat usually ripens at the same time or slightly later than Cabernet and although not quite as vigorous as Cabernet still tends to over crop if well watered. Without good moisture management crops of 10-12 tonnes per acre are likely and whilst at these levels it will still produce commercially acceptable wines with good colour, the wines will not display the variety's hallmark massive structure and flavours. The flavours can tend to become a bit coarse at high crop levels.

From the Uruguayan and Madiran experiences the optimum cropping level for quality fruit seems to be around 5-6 tonnes per acre, at which levels the vine can produce enough sugar to offset the high natural acids of this variety. At the opposite end of the scale, Chateau Montus, Madiran's most famous producer, restricts its Tannat vines to 2-3 tonnes per acre.

In the vineyard, Tannat is recognised by its round, Malbec-like leaf, with downward curling edges which are dark green in colour and bare underneath. The shoots, which have relatively few tendrils, often tend to be uneven in length with short, thick internodes, especially at the base.

The canopy is usually fairly open giving good ventilation to bunches, although from a distance it can give the perception of having fairly dense foliage. This may be part of the reason why the variety is quite resistant to mildew.

Tannat usually has a late budburst, around 12-14 days after Chardonnay. It is able to produce large well filled bunches, with a high number of small berries, which are sometimes carried high on the bearer shoots. If the flowering period is cold and windy, bunches are likely to be more compact with some small, green, seedless berries. This will increase the likelihood of hard, harsh acids and tannins in the finished wine.

Veraison can be quite lengthy, taking up to three to four weeks before bunches are evenly coloured. With its thick-skinned grapes and thick bunch stems, it is quite resistant to damage from mechanical harvesting.

The areas in which Tannat will produce the best results in Australia are likely to be the warmer regions. This is also in part due to the fact that the variety is quite susceptible to frost damage.

With Tannat's high levels of acid and hard tannins, it needs heat to produce as much sugar as possible to counter-balance the acids. When the grapes are at around

14-14.5 Baume, they will typically still have 7-10gm/litre of acid and a pH of around 3.0 to 3.3. In cooler areas, or cooler vintages the acidity will be even higher, which can detract from the mouthfeel of the finished wine.

In the winery, extended skin contact is not recommended as with the variety's high natural tannins, it can become very hard and rustic.

Likewise oak treatment needs to be handled very carefully so as to ensure that the wine does not become too tannic and hard. Most wineries in Madiran, and to a lesser extent in Uruguay, mature their wines in larger old barrels, which effectively allow the slow oxygenation of the wine, rather than tannin pick up. Some of the more progressive Uruguayan wineries are currently experimenting with micro-oxygenation in order to soften the wine and make it more accessible on release.

The only Aussie Tannats I have tasted are:

- Irvine Wines 2003, a small trial batch sample, which won't be released. Being the first crop, it was lacking in structure and depth but had the great colour and tannins so typical of this variety.
- Symphonia King Valley 2003, again great colour, with a lovely delicate aroma of freshly baked pastry and a hint of spice. Only 100 dozen made. On the palate masses of berry flavours. It is slightly lighter in body than the Madirans I have tasted. It has lovely grippy tannins giving it a very long drying finish, thus making it a great food wine. I suspect that the lighter weight on the palate is as a result of being grown in a cooler climate, as Peter Read advises that the vines are 16 years old, so it can't be because of "young vines".

Whilst we wait for our winemakers to discover this variety, you can enjoy the great flavours of Tannat in the wines of Madiran, such as Chateau D' Aydie and Chateau Montus, which ▶

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are available through fine wine retailers such as Adelaide's East End Cellars. I've been unable to track down any Uruguayan Tannats in Australia.

I am sure that in the future we will see some excellent and interesting Australian varietal Tannats, however, the greatest potential application for Tannat in Australia, is likely to be as a blender to add structure, texture, tannin and/or colour to "thinner" Cabernet or Merlot wines especially from hot vintages when these varieties can struggle to achieve sufficient colour.

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# VAMVVIA opens new expansion site

The Victorian and Murray Valley Vine Improvement Association expansion site was officially opened at Dareton, New South Wales, in May.

John Cobb, Member for Parkes and Parliamentary Secretary to Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson and John Forrest, Member for Mallee joined representatives of the wine, dried and tablegrape industries and the Sunraysia Area Consultative Committee, mayors of Wentworth Rural Council and Mildura Rural City Council and other industry and community representatives at the event.

Chairman of VAMVVIA, Paul Croxton, welcomed attendees and highlighted the level of cooperation from industry and community stakeholders in bringing the project to fruition.

Croxton thanked the primary funding bodies, the Department of Transport & Regional Services (Regional Partnerships Program) and Horticulture Australia Ltd. He also acknowledged

the significant input of NSW Department of Primary Industries, through the provision of land and services and members of the VAMVVIA committee who had contributed in the planning phase of the expansion program. He also acknowledged the efforts of VAMVVIA's research and development officer, Julian Connellan, for his role in development of the plant material, property design, installation of equipment and planting of the site.

The expansion site has been planned using world's best practice in the design of the irrigation system, trellis design and effective on-farm use of irrigation waste water. The site consists of 18,500 high health status vines with the potential to produce 1.5 million cuttings annually. Croxton said all mother vines used to source material for the development had been PCR tested and all were free of viruses known to be detrimental to grapevine health.

Don Carrazza, chairman of the Sunraysia Area Consultative Committee (SACC) acknowledged the success of the project, noting that the site had been transformed from a clear paddock to a completed rootstock and vinifera development in only seven months.

He commended the efforts of the SACC and VAMVVIA staff who worked closely during the planning stages and identified opportunities for community benefit through increased employment opportunities when the property was in full production.

In particular, Carrazza acknowledged that the passion of VAMVVIA chairman Paul Croxton and general manager Michael Pullen for the expansion project had been a big plus for the viticultural industry, stating that VAMVVIA now had national recognition for the provision of the best quality planting material in Australia.

Delia Dray, manager, Horticulture Industry Development, NSW Department of Primary Industries, said the NSW Government was currently in negotiation with VAMVVIA to provide additional land adjacent to the development site that would secure sufficient land for VAMVVIA's long-term future.

During keynote speech presentations, Cobb commended VAMVVIA for the Association's vision and identified that projects such as the VAMVVIA expansion development were always successful when industry and community acted in partnership.

"The grape industry is making a significant contribution to the national economy, with the wine industry in Sunraysia and the Murray Valley region producing 30% of the winegrapes grown in Australia," Cobb said, adding the region was the largest producer of dried and tablegrapes in Australia.

Cobb emphasised the need for grape producers throughout Australia to be able to access high health status vines to ensure production was of the highest quality.

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