

Lagrein La-good



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It took the arrival of migrants from all over the world to broaden the Australian eating habits to the point where it is now challenging (other than at a truck stop, perhaps) to go to a restaurant and have a meat and three veg meal.

Today we are blessed with some of the world's most delicious, diverse and cosmopolitan food. And the same is starting to happen with wine.

Over the past decade the number of wineries planting alternative varieties has expanded massively, and with the Aussie dollar at long-time highs, the cost of imported wine has plummeted. As a result many more Aussie wine drinkers are experimenting with wines made from alternative varieties or imported from overseas. Sure, some of them are ordinary, as were some of the early Asian restaurants, but the good ones more than make up for this and broaden the Aussie palate.

Wines and varieties from Italy and Spain are starting to become entrenched into our wine psyche with the sales of varieties such as Sangiovese and Tempranillo climbing rapidly, for both imported and locally grown wines. Thus while there will always be a big market for great Aussie Shiraz or Cabernet, the demand for mediocre wines from traditional varieties will wane and instead there will be considerable demand for other exciting wines made from 'new' varieties that many people have not yet heard of.

One exciting Italian variety that has a great future in Australia is Lagrein. Originating in the Trentino-Alto Adige area of northern Italy, this variety is presumed to have come from the Lagarina Valley in that area. Lagrein is a vigorous variety which needs good management to avoid overcropping and the resultant tannic, acidic and thin green-tasting wines. Left to their own devices in the vineyard, the vines go feral with significant vegetative growth, drooping canes and lateral shoots. Somewhat like Grenache, too much water and you end up with cask-quality lolly water.

However, when properly managed in the vineyard, Lagrein produces a deep coloured, deliciously flavoured, tannic, high acid wine, which makes it ideal for blending with low tannin or low colour varieties. A modicum of Lagrein can certainly enhance a lighter coloured, low acid wine. Alternatively, a big Lagrein wine can be lightened up or softened by the addition of a less powerful variety. An excellent example of this is Jacob's

Creek Limited Release 2007 Lagrein Dolcetto. It is a big, beautiful, flavour-packed wine which at six years old still needs plenty of breathing time to open up. It is a mouth-filling wine with oodles of cherry and blackberry flavours along with hints of chocolate and a tight, lingering finish.

As a straight varietal wine Lagrein exhibits beautiful earthy, dark cherry, plummy flavours with dark chocolate and even the occasional hint of liquorice, a mineral edge and floral acidity. It is a full bodied wine without being heavy. This makes it a fabulous food wine, especially for richer, heartier dishes where the wine's acidity and higher tannins help to cut through the richness of the dish.

About 25 wineries grow Lagrein in Australia. The Riverland Vine Improvement Committee, Australia's largest propagator of certified grape vine cuttings and rootstocks for growers, has started to make small batches of wines from some of the 'new' varieties they grow for propagation. One of these wines is Lagrein, and its 2010 vintage won gold at the 2011 Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show in Mildura, while its 2012 vintage, now marketed under the Cirami Estate label, won the Best Italian Varietal Trophy at the 2012 show. This wine is lighter than the other Lagrein I have tasted because it comes from young vines. Having said that, it has interesting green tea aromas, beautiful dark almost bitter cherries on the palate, which is robust and mouthfilling with a tight, crisp finish. It is so drinkable. What an innovative way to advertise their services, by getting the growers to taste the wine they could make from the variety if they planted RVIC cuttings.

Another winery making consistently good Lagrein as well as being the only producer that I have been able to track down, of a sparkling Lagrein is Hartzbarn at Moculta in the Barossa. Hartzbarn 2005 Lagrein is drinking superbly with its amazingly deep red colour (looks like a three-or-three-year-old Shiraz) masses of tight plummy fruit and a lingering, slightly acid finish. It was simply brilliant with a plate of osso bucco. It explodes onto the palate in tiny bubbles of flavour which make it almost impossible to put the glass down until it is empty.

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