

The 3 MS

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Mataro, Mourvedre and Monastrell are of course the different names (Australia, France and Spain respectively) for the same variety. Despite the fact that the variety probably originated from Spain, where most of it is grown, more producers around the globe (except in Spain) are calling the variety Mourvedre rather than Monastrell. This is strange given the average wine drinker would find it significantly harder to pronounce Mourvedre correctly than they would Monastrell.

Monastrell, as I prefer to call it, is mainly grown in warmer areas because it needs plenty of sunshine as it buds and ripens late in the season so that in cooler climates it does not always get enough heat. It is also a thirsty vine, requiring plenty of water to produce flavour-packed fruit that isn't overly jammy (when over-ripe and used in vintage ports) or herbaceous (when under-ripe). It is susceptible to powdery and downy mildew and has a tendency, when not managed well, to create a leafy canopy. This translates into the vegetative characters in the wine as the berries are too shaded. A further challenge for growers is the variety has a small harvest window in that there is a short space of time from when the grapes reach optimum maturity before the acid level starts dropping away significantly and the grapes start to shrivel, giving them that jammy, prune, porty character.

Monastrell usually tends to produce tannic, high alcohol wines; however the flavours can vary greatly depending on where and how it is grown. With proper attention, TLC (tender loving care) and just the right amount of water, the resultant wines can be redolent with lovely blackberry or red fruit flavours and have attractive gamey, meaty or earthy overtones without these becoming overpowering.

If the vines are not treated with TLC the wines tend to appear to be sulphury and have barnyard aromas and rustic flavours. While these characters tend to mellow over time, they are not pleasant in the young wine and given that these days most wine is consumed shortly after release, it pays to seek out a producer who lavishes TLC on their vines.

Mourvedre was in severe decline in France until the 1990s by which time there was only about 500 hectares left, as its wines were considered very rustic and clumsy by wine aficionados. However, in recent times the variety has found new favour mainly as a 'booster' to local generic reds and more importantly as a blending component in the ever growing ranks of premium blended red wines.

Today in France there are 9,500 hectares of Mourvedre growing

predominantly in the regions of Languedoc-Roussillon, Provence and Southern Rhône. The resurgence of the variety is being led by wines from the Bandol Appellation which must have a minimum of 50 percent Mourvedre with the rest of the blend being made up of any/all Grenache, Cinsault, Shiraz and Carignan. The best of these wines are well regarded around the world and demonstrate what Mourvedre is capable of achieving when skilfully blended with a good support crew.

In Spain, there are 65,000 hectares of the variety planted, making it one of the most planted red varieties after Tempranillo and Granacha. There used to be closer to 100,000 hectares of Monastrell but growers have been ripping out older, less productive vines and replanting with 'global' varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz.

Monastrell is found almost everywhere in Spain. As premium and straight varietal wine, it is found mainly in the areas of Yecla, Valencia, Jumilla and Alicante where it is one of the main grapes permitted under the DO (Dominacion de Origen) rules. In recent years, a growing number of wines from Yecla and Alicante have become available in Australia. One brand worth noting is La Purisima, whose 'Estio' is its youthful, value for money version, which is very glugable, while its 'Trapio' is the more expensive, full blown expression of the variety – savoury, succulent and stylish.

Monastrell is grown in California and Washington State where there is just slightly more grown than here in Australia. There, it is usually called Mataro and used predominantly for blending in Rhône blends. A great example of this are the wines of Bonny Doon Vineyard whose eccentric owner Randall Grahm is considered the original 'Rhône Ranger' for his passion for Rhône style wines. Most of the wines in the portfolio have a modicum of Mataro. Ridge Vineyard, maker of my favourite American Zinfandels, also uses small amounts of Mataro to help achieve the right balance/flavour profiles in most of the 13 different Zinfandels it produces.

In Australia we have just under 1,000 hectares of Monastrell and while a few winemakers still call their wine Mataro, most do not, as over the years the name has picked up the connotations of being 'cheap and commercial' wine having been mainly used in casks, port and commercial red wines. About 175 wineries in Australia produce Mataro/Mourvedre/Monastrell. There are some straight varietals made. The ones worth seeking out include Pikes Gills Farm Mourvedre 2010, Rosemount Nursery Mataro 2011, Morgan Simpson Plan B Mataro 2010 and Patrilli's Dover Gardens Mourvedre 2010. ■