

# THE FULL MONTE



Montepulciano is still a relatively unknown grape variety in Australia with only about 20 producers growing it, but 'By Jingo' there are some very good examples of it emerging in this country, as Dan Traucki reports.

WORDS DAN TRAUCKI

**T**he word *Montepulciano* causes confusion in a way only the Italians can. Not only is there a grape variety called Montepulciano, but there is also a town called that, where they make wine, but they make it using Sangiovese grapes, not Montepulciano. Wow, and I thought having both a cheese and a grape variety called Pecorino was confusing enough.

So the story is that if the label says 'Vino Nobile de Montepulciano', it is from that town and is in fact a Sangiovese wine. All clear? If however the label just says 'Montepulciano' on it, it means that the wine is made from the Montepulciano variety, such as 'Montepulciano d' Abruzzo' meaning that it comes from the hilly coastal region of Abruzzo in central Italy. Also, being a very old Italian variety, it has more synonyms than you can poke a stick at, which only adds to the confusion.

Being such a young wine nation, we don't have any such confusion in Australia. If a bottle of wine says *Montepulciano* on the label, then it is made from that grape variety; so much more straight-forward than in the Old World.

The origins of Montepulciano are vague as it is often confused with Sangiovese in the vineyard. What can be said is that it is definitively of Italian origin, it has been around for centuries and is widely planted, being approved in 20 or so of the 95 grapegrowing districts of Italy. It is difficult to obtain

accurate acreage figures due to the confusion between it and Sangiovese, but best estimates are that there are 20,000 to 25,000 hectares of the variety in Italy. Montepulciano (Monte) ripens rather late in the season and is therefore not a suitable variety for the cooler, higher altitude grapegrowing areas of Italy. It is also unsuitable for areas of higher rainfall, as it has a tendency to crop heavily, producing bigger, fatter berries with a higher juice-to-skin ratio, making lesser wines and lacking in the variety's distinctive plummy, weighty flavours and nice ripe tannins. Thus in the DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) of Abruzzo, yields are restricted to 14 tonnes per hectare to ensure the wines aren't too watery or bland.

Monte is grown throughout the mountainous Abruzzo wine region. Towards the southern end of the region, the countryside flattens out as it stretches down towards the Adriatic Sea and it is here on these flatter, warmer southern areas that most of the Monte is grown – around two-thirds to three-quarters of production. This is where the variety produces 'workhorse' wines, just like warm-area Shiraz does in Australia. As one heads up into the mountains and away from the sea, while the land is still sun-drenched, the climate becomes much cooler, the soil less fertile and the wines become darker, denser, deeper and much more concentrated. It is here that the best Montes are made.

There is little Monte grown anywhere in the world outside

its designated areas in Italy. In the USA, the only one I was able to track down was made by Jacuzzi Family Vineyards in Sonoma. In Australia there are only about 20 wineries growing the variety, but they are worth tracking down.

Like with many other varieties, there are appreciable differences in the style and flavour of the wine depending on the climate where the grapes are grown. A good Monte will be deeply coloured with a fragrant blackberry nose and flavours with maybe a hint of cloves, good acidity and strong tight tannins, which sometimes can appear to have a hint of sweetness about them, but are not overpowering as they can be in many Italian red varieties.

I found a few Australian Montes to taste and it was interesting to see the differences in the styles from different climates. Cirami Estate 2012 Montepulciano, produced by the intrepid band of merry people at the Riverland Vine Improvement Committee and which won top gold in its class at last year's Australian Alternative Variety Wine Show (AAVWS) in Mildura, was deeply and densely coloured with a tight, brooding brambly nose. On the palate it was rich and warm with soft sweet fruit. Eminently glugable.

Tscharke 2011 The Master from Marananga in the Barossa (which won bronze at the same AAVWS) has started evolving and while similar to the Cirami in colour and nose, on the palate it was better structured, tighter, more Italian in style

with higher acidity and tannins balanced out by a smidge of that Barossa richness. While it was a bit sharp to sit and drink on its own, it would make an ideal food accompaniment and it would cut through the oiliness of most Italian pasta dishes like lasagne or spaghetti bolognese.

By Jingo 2008 Montepulciano from the Adelaide Hills was stunning in every respect – awesome colour with great density, a soft, full, rich nose and absolutely oodles of gobsmacking flavour on the palate. Beautifully tightly structured, superbly balanced with masses of flavours that just linger for ages. This is world class wine that I would be happy to show it to overseas visitors as an excellent example of quality Australian wine.

To recap, the Riverland (hot climate) Monte was a big, beautiful, blousy drink on its own, with some lovely fruit sweetness. The Barossa (warm climate) Monte was tighter structured with higher acidity and some richness on the plate; definitely a food wine. The Adelaide Hills (cooler climate) Monte was just divinely balanced and flavoursome. I am confident that more growers will champion the cause of this outstanding variety and give us some truly memorable wines like the By Jingo, which really is the full Monte. ■

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