

A bottle of wine with a red foil-wrapped cork stands behind two glasses filled with red wine. The glasses are positioned on a dark wooden surface. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the glass and the rich color of the wine against a dark background.

Long live the
KING!

THERE ARE SO MANY
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MADE CABERNET WINES BOTH AS
STAND-ALONES AND IN BLENDS.

Cabernet continues to hold its title among challengers to the throne.

DAN TRAUCKI

OF THE SO CALLED "NOBLE" grape varieties, many people consider cabernet sauvignon to be the king, with chardonnay being the queen, pinot noir the flighty prince (occasionally dashing and charming, often bland and clumsy), merlot one of the king's earls and shiraz a rustic duke from the countryside.

The king has held court for a very long time, starting with his fiefdom of Bordeaux. His rule spread during the "enlightened" 20th century to the "New World" of the Americas, the antipodes and he even made significant inroads in the "Old World" of Europe, especially Italy and Spain. Here in Australia in the 1970s through to the mid-'80s many king cabernet's wines were described as "elegant" or "sophisticated" whereas in fact they were thin and green from under ripe fruit. These wines needed extensive cellaring if they were to have any chance of "coming good" and becoming a pleasant drink. From the mid '80s onwards we saw a drive towards riper fruit and bigger, higher alcohol wines, culminating in the mid-2000s with wines, under the Parker influence, peaking at around 15 per cent alcohol. A good demonstration of this is the fact that the 1980 Lindeman's St George Cabernet that won the 1981 Jimmy Watson Trophy was 13 per cent alc/vol and is still drinking magnificently today (32 years later), whereas the 1992 Elderton Cabernet which won the Jimmy Watson in 1993 was 14.5 per cent alc/vol, which, while still quite drinkable, is not as elegant and graceful as the St George.

Many of these ubber ripe, high alcohol wines were designed for early drinking not only because of the fact that people are drinking their wines much sooner than they used to, but also because most of these monster wines lack the structure and balance to stand the test of time. This is not to say that all the older, lower alcohol cabernets were brilliant and all the newer, higher alcohol ones are not, merely to suggest that, in my opinion, the greater effort and TLC (tender loving care) required to produce a quality wine at lower alcohol levels translates into a longer lived

wine, with more finesse and elegance than macho high alcohol versions. Right now there is the start of a hint of a possible reversal to the high alcohol trend with a few winemakers producing slightly lower alcohol wines than they have in the recent past. One can occasionally find a cabernet with an alcohol content below 14 per cent. In order to downplay the inherent "doughnut effect" of a "hole in the middle" (lack of flavour on the mid palate), king cabernet has always needed a great deal of effort to show at his best, and often the support of consorts such as merlot to really shine. In Bordeaux, where the king's ancestral castle is located, he can be supported to varying degrees, not only by earl merlot but also prince cabernet franc (his weaker younger brother), lord petit verdot (the dark sheep of the kingdom), major malbec (sometimes seen but rarely used) and finally the young upstart knight durif (bold, brash and rustic). Whereas the duke of shiraz has been banished from the castle to roam across the outer lands (Rhône) for all time.

In other parts of his kingdom such as the young Americas, king cabernet has mainly been seen in a stand-alone role doing a soliloquy on centre stage. He is so revered that few deign to include his supporting minions for fear of incurring the wrath of the populace and the money gods. While in the irreverent and unruly antipodes, king cabernet was often - shock horror- forced to mix with shiraz to make either a cabernet shiraz or a shiraz cabernet, with the occasional Clare Valley radical such as Leasingham making a cabernet malbec blend instead. With the advent in the 1990s of significant volumes of merlot in Australia, most producers switched from the iconic Aussie blend of cabernet and shiraz to making cab merlots. While today there are some stunning cab merlot blends such as Cullen's, Petaluma and Parker (Terra Rosa - not Robert) all of which are ranked among the top 100 Australian wines, there is also a sea of mediocre, bland wines where the merlot serves to prop up the rather ordinary cabernet, which is either green or thin, or both.

On the other hand, in the same top 100 ranking there are five cab shiraz or shiraz cab blends listed, including Penfolds Bin 389 and Lindeman's Limestone Ridge. Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of good cab merlots around but as a percentage of the total cab merlots made, it is significantly lower than the percentage of good cabernet shiraz or shiraz cabernet blends around. While the "Old World" consider it blasphemous to pair the mighty king cabernet with the duke of shiraz, in Australia we know that they make an formidable pair, with the shiraz, whose peak flavours are on the mid-palate, ably negating the doughnut hole in the cabernet mid-palate.

As the rest of the world's wine producers seem to shun this fantastic blend, the Australian wine industry has the opportunity to make this blend its own on the international wine stage. It would take a concerted effort by the Australian wine industry to achieve this, but it would be worth the effort as it would help make our wines stand out internationally. In this day and age of democracy, where the peasants (minor varieties) are being emancipated, it matters not to the populace whether cabernet is prime minister (as opposed to being king) or the leader of the opposition - with shiraz being PM, but rather that the electorate gets good value (drinkability) with the occasional excellent bi-partisanship to enhance things.

I know people who only drink cabernet because "it is the best wine in the world" and others who refuse to drink cabernet because "it's not a patch on shiraz". I feel sad for both these camps because there are so many outstanding wines available to drinkers today that there is plenty of room for well-made cabernet wines both as stand-alones and in blends. While the duke may be vying for the crown of the wine world, king cabernet is still certainly an elder statesman worth seeking out. 