

The Secret of Saperavi

A Soviet Block Unlocked

The Republic of Georgia in the former Soviet Union is known as one of the oldest winemaking regions in the world. There's proof of wine having been made there 8,000 years ago.

It is also the home of an amazing red grape called Saperavi (literally meaning paint or dye). Saperavi is very dark skinned and makes an intensely deep colored, high acid, strong flavored wine. It is one of the few grape varieties which actually have red anthocyanin (color pigment) in the pulp as well as the skin.

Saperavi wines are very long lived, with 50 plus year old examples from the Soviet era being occasionally uncovered. The variety is extremely hardy, able to withstand the severe cold of its native region as well withstanding the



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rudimentary care and handling that it endured for most of the last century under the restrictions of communist rule.

These attributes made Saperavi the most popular red in the various grape growing regions of the former Soviet Union as well as Georgia.

In Australia, to date 14 out of the 2,800 wineries in Australia have planted Saperavi. These are mainly in the warmer climate of South Australia (Barossa Valley & McLaren Vale) and in the cool climate of the Alpine Valley in Victoria.

Thus far the variety appears to be "at home" and comfortable in both climates. With the cool climate producing a leaner more elegant wine, the warmer climate produces a bigger bolder wine.

I suspect it won't be long before other growers around the world jump on the band wagon as Saperavi has many appealing characteristics.

Not only does it make an excellent wine on its own, but it is also ideal for blending with other grape varieties. The very

deep colored wine that results from its very dark skins, will appeal to growers in warmer climates, where in very hot vintages they can add Saperavi to their other red wines, such as Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot to enhance the depth of color.

The issue in very hot vintages is that not only do many red varieties have less depth of color than normal but also that the resultant wines have lower acid levels. Here again blending in some Saperavi can significantly improve the wine because of its natural high acidity levels.

Saperavi wines appear to age very slowly and gracefully and early indications are that it will make a long lived wine here in Australia like it does in its native Georgia.

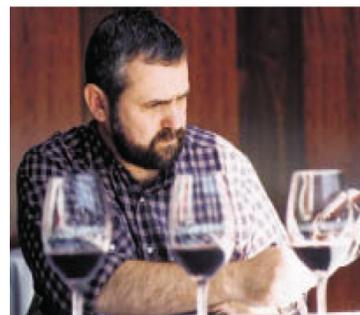
It would appear that most of the Saperavi vines in Australia were sourced from the varietal Block at Roseworthy Agricultural College which has an impressive collection of vines gathered from vineyards around the world over the last 100 years. This collection includes rare varieties such as the Russian white grape Rkatsiteli.

Earlier this year a journalist from the newspaper "Georgia Today" contacted some of the Australian Saperavi growers and asked "share with me in regard to your own experience with Saperavi, how you came to start growing it, how it is being handled in the vineyard and the winery, how successful it has proven to be, its popularity with your customers, its projected future, prices, etc" which sounds a bit like a subtle "KGB" style inquisition to find out how we as opposition are tracking with their precious variety.

Most recently the news services have been reporting that the Russians are looking at easing/removing the Georgian embargo but if the Georgian's are smart, in my opinion, they will continue to focus their efforts westwards and particularly towards the USA & Canada where the depth of color and flavor in their wines will be appreciated.

Whilst the Saperavi vines here in Australia are still very young, as each year passes and they mature a bit more, the wine being produced continues to improve in quality. I have been tracking the Barossa Saperavi made by Patritti Wines since their first vintage in 2007 and each year the wine has greater depth and complexity than the previous year. The current 2010 is fabulous, so much so that their Chinese distributor bought the whole vintage.

So my advice would be to keep your eyes & ears open for Saperavi over the next few years, as I am convinced that it will make some truly outstanding wines here in Australia, but don't let the Georgians know what we are doing!



Dan Traucki JP, Wine Industry Consultant, and Director of Wine Assist Pty Ltd, has nearly 26 years experience in the wine industry. He regularly writes for *Wine Business Magazine* and occasionally for *Australian Grapegrower & Winemaker Magazine*. Dan commenced his working career as an accountant but in the late 1980's changed to the wine industry joining the Orlando Wyndham Group, makers of Jacobs Creek where he spent 10 years.

Throughout his career, Dan moved around the world and to many different wineries, helping to consult, reorganize and rebuild. Today through Wine Assist, Dan continues to offer a wide range of services to the Australian Wine Industry and wine enthusiasts.