Riverland seminar addresses viticulture, winemaking and business of alternatives

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On 29 July, the Riverland Alternative Wine Group held its first seminar on alternative grape varieties at the Renmark Club on the banks of the Murray River in Renmark.

Whilst over 400 people applied to attend, the seminar was limited to 100 participants due to the space constraints for the benchmark tastings involved. The number of applicants demonstrates the rapidly rising interest in alternative varieties.

Centered around the Spanish grape varieties Albarino/Savagnin and Tempranillo along with the Italian varieties Fiano, Vermentino, Montepulciano and Nero d’Avola the seminar was focused and in depth.

The viticultural part of the seminar covered a wide range of topics from the climatic conditions experienced in the varieties’ native areas along with their viticultural performance there. This was followed by a sincere assessment of failures and successes experienced over the years by Angus Vineyards who grow a considerable number of alternative varieties.

Following morning tea came the first benchmark tasting. Andrew La Nauze, Yalumba winemaker, presented the white wines, with each bracket consisting of a mix of locally made wine and imported wine for that variety. The order of presentation was Vermentino, Fiano and finally Albarino/Savagnin.

Wrapping up the viticultural side of the seminar, there was a presentation on matching alternative varieties to a changing climate.

The wine business part of the seminar got off to an eye-opening start with a very realistic retail perspective from Angus Buchanan of East End Cellars on alternative varieties and the do’s & don’ts of how to present them to the trade as well as sage comments on the use or overuse of oak.

The presentation after lunch was from 919 wines, a Riverland winery that is using alternative varieties to create a point of difference, with Shiraz being the only “mainstream” varietal in their portfolio.

Matt Gant, First Drop Wine, then guided the group through the red wine benchmark tasting, reviewing Montepulciano, Nero d’Avola and Tempranillo.

In each of the wine brackets, there was a mix of samples from their country of origin and Australia. The exception was the Nero d’Avola tasting, where all three wines were Italian.

Then to tie it all together, Max Allen wine writer and wine show judge discussed where alternative varieties fit in to the future of the Australian wine landscape.

The main points that were emphasised during the seminar included that research before planting was vitally important. Not only research into how the variety will grow in your location, but also into how it will fit in and be accepted by the marketplace.

Viticultural selection should also consider possible climate changes, with good acidity/acid retention also being a key factor.

Research into clonal selection is also critical, as recent events with Albarino have demonstrated.

Another significant point is that in general Australian grapegrowers tend to grow all varieties in the same way, which in the case of many of the alternative varieties will lead to failure as they have different requirements and need much greater attention to detail. It was strongly suggested that a visit to some prior to planting would be a very wise investment in research.

Likewise, winemakers were urged to treat each alternative variety individually so their character and personality can shine through rather than just making another ‘dry red’. I also believe the amount of oak exposure plays a critical part in this, as many of the ‘new’ varieties I have seen in recent years have been over-oaked to buggerly thus reducing the chance of consumer acceptance.

Winemakers should also consider whether the variety is best used as a stand-alone varietal wine or as a blender to enhance other more conventional varieties. A good example of this is, in my opinion, Petit Verdot, with most of the straight varietal wines being too tannic and hard, whereas as a blender when added skillfully to Cabernet Sauvignon, it lifts and enhances the wine so that the whole is better than the sum of the parts.

One presenter made a very wise comment in saying that if your wine from an alternative variety is not good enough to stand alone, in comparison with examples from that wine’s homeland or benchmark Australian samples - do not release it as a straight-labelled varietal. Use it for blending rather than detracting from the likelihood of that variety being accepted by consumers due to the release of a sub-standard wine. Your alternative wine must have varietal identity, quality and personality in order to succeed.

According to the Riverland Alternative Wine Group’s chair Ashley Ratcliff, the seminar would not have been possible if not for the hard work of the committee and generous support of JMA Engineering, 919 Wines, The Yalumba Nursery, Riverland Vine Improvement Committee, Mike Mason Fencing, and the Riverland Wine Industry Development Council.

Unlike most wine industry seminars, I have been to in recent times, this one started on time, ran on time and finished on time, which was excellent for those who had travelled a long way to attend.

In discussions with a number of committee members on the day, another seminar is currently being planned for November. If the success of the Riverland Alternative Wine Group’s inaugural seminar is a guide for things to come, I would suggest to book early.

If you were unable to attend the seminar, the presentations are available for a small fee. To obtain a copy or to find out more about the Riverland Alternative Wine Group please contact Ashley Ratcliff on 0411 370 057 or EricSemmler on 0417 997 414.