

## **What are Australian Classic Wine Styles – for cellaring and investing?**

Compared to other Australian industries, wine has a long history. There were vine cuttings with the First Fleet in 1788. By 1830's & 1840's Australia had a fairly substantial wine industry with healthy exports to England – to an extent that we were called “John Bull's Vineyard”, a reference to the typical successful English middle class businessman with the fictional name “John Bull”. The wine industry did slump by around about the 1900's and was revived again in the 1970's. Compared to Europe wine production, Australian experience is quite young. Europeans in the classic regions have had centuries and centuries of experience - where to grow grapes, what clones to use and how best to extract the flavors from their vineyards. In Australia we don't have that long history of being able to get the success and so we have had to learn much more quickly.

In the 1970's wine consumption boomed and there was a scattergun approach which saw an explosion of planting grapes all over Australia. All sorts of varieties got planted in all sorts of regions. When things got tough in the 80's economically and lots of small vineyards found that they couldn't survive very well, there was a return by producers to what they did best. There was a realisation that certain grape varieties did best in certain areas. This philosophy had actually been around for quite some time already in Australia however many new pioneers ignored it. In Europe there are laws that compel only certain varieties in the regions. In Australia, the emphasis now in this new millennium is that we should pick a grape variety, and in fact a particular clone of the grape variety, that suits your climate, your soil, and your vineyard location.

The principle is to extract the best flavors out of your vineyard, thereby giving you the best chance of making a good wine. So there is quite an interest in the best wine styles that come from the particular regions and these are Australia's Classic Wines.

Some classic wines have been around for some time; the Barossa Valley, warmer climate, fairly prominently oaked shiraz is a great classic. There is Riesling from Clare and Eden Valley. Coonawara is a cooler region in South Australia, is famous for, initially Cabernet Sauvignon but now is famous for reds in general. Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon is classic. The Melbourne “Dress Circle” is famous for sparkling wine, pinot noir and chardonnay. Traditional regions like the Hunter Valley in NSW famous for Semillon and shiraz have been joined by new areas such as Cowra which is fairly well-known for Chardonnay. Various parts of Tasmania are famous for Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and sparkling wines. More recently we are seeing the grassy quite full flavor Semillon and sauvignon blanc coming from Western Australia.

These wines are classic because they have distinctive character and high quality. This means good ageing potential and higher values.

## **How do I Judge Wine like a Wine Judge?**

The wine show system in Australia is famous. There are famous images of judges in white coats spitting out of the wines. Lots of jokes are made! However the Australian

show system has been very rigorous and provides an excellent system for assessing wines expertly and independently. Wine judging by one's peers in a competition is an exacting process. The show system has been one of the factors that has led to the high technical wine producing reputation of Australia.

However there are criticisms of the show system. Certain wines are very noticeable in the shows and tend to do better. These are mainly the very full flavored styles. More delicate wines don't get a fair go in the show system because they are not as noticed by the judges. There are wines made with plenty of flavour but with styles away from the mainstream – the same criticism is made. The show organisers respond by saying that they are reacting to those criticisms and are having better-balanced panels of judges. There are international judges and Australian judges who are a mixture of winemakers, marketers and knowledgeable consumers.

Some knowledge of the show system helps any wine drinker. It is good to know whether the labels that contain medals mean something. It is great to try the awarded wines and calibrate your own taste.

In Australia the show system awards wines a score out of 20 points. In practice a wine that's everyday drinking - a reasonable sort of wine at a reasonable price, will score around about 15 points or maybe 14 out of 20. If there's a little bit of fault, it may score 13; quite substantial faults 12; if it's a shocker it will score 11 or 10. If a wine scores 15 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> it will score a bronze medal. If it scores 17 or above it scores a silver medal. If it scores 18 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> or more it scores a gold medal. If there is a trophy awarded then the highest wine in that class will win the trophy. There may be numerous gold medals but only one wine will win the trophy. In practice this means that a wine that has won a bronze medal is a very good above average wine. If it has won a silver medal it is an extremely good wine and one to look out for. If it's a gold medal it is a wonderful wine and you'll want to go off and write poetry about it.

There are other scales used. For example the American critic Robert Parker and the Wine Spectator Magazine System in the USA use 100 points.

There are objective definitions of quality – attributes such as flavour intensity, freshness, palate length, complexity, subtlety, aftertaste, balance and texture are all important. It is more common than not, for various judges to give very similar scores.

### **What do the Words on the Label Mean?**

The label is vital! In many cases it gives the information needed in making a decision whether to purchase.

There are two types of information that you see on the label.

Firstly, there is important statutory information that must be shown. This includes the name and address of the maker, the designation of the product - whether it is a sparkling wine, red wine or whatever, the name of the wine (usually a grape variety name), the

alcohol content, how many standard drinks, the contents of the bottle, what additives have been used, and the origin of the actual wine itself. The main additive is a preservative, sulphur dioxide, which is described as a code number - Preservative 220. They are new rules about the origin of the wine. Approved area names must be used. There has been some controversy about that, because there are boundaries being drawn by the wine industry and there is debate as to whether you are inside or outside the boundary. In Coonawarra particularly there have been challenges to the official boundary.

The second category of information on the label is the general story about the wine. Reading between the lines can be important. There are subtle things that tell you about the quality of the wine. You can judge certain things by the name used. For example a blend will list the majority component first – a cabernet-merlot is different to a merlot-cabernet. A wine might be a shiraz but it could have an individual vineyard name as well – for example “Andrew’s Block Shiraz”, usually meaning a quality selection. The fine print on the back label can have a lot of detailed information. Often, when a winemaker is proud of the wine, then a detailed description is included. Look and see if the information is factual and interesting and tells you important details. There is often text on the back label but it actually doesn’t say very much. On the other hand you see label text that says too much! It can describe how it was grown on a special vineyard or was harvested on a certain date; a certain ripeness; and then special oak barrels and so on. Obviously in this case the winemaker is very proud of what’s gone on and they’re giving the information on the label even if you don’t understand it in detail. It means that a fair bit of care and attention has gone into the making of that wine. Many producers put show medals on the label and sometimes it is very influential to buyers. If you see lots of medals and are impressed by them, then have a little look at what they are. If a wine has won a medal, particularly a gold medal, in a large important wine show then that is certainly significant.

### **How do I know to Drink it Now or Keep it?**

Whether to drink a wine straight away or whether to cellar it is one of the great topics in the wine industry. It is an avid interest not only in Australia but worldwide. Consumers are fascinated by cellaring potential. The majority do not carry out cellaring – but this does not lessen the interest. Most consumers buy wine for short term consumption. A significant group have a stock of wine on hand – sometimes quite a large quantity. A small group carries out systematic cellaring. This is where you actually are putting wines away to see what the passage of time will do to them to enhance their quality. To do that you have to have multiple bottles and you have to be prepared to try one every now and again to see how they are developing. That’s different to the system where you have a stock of wine at home, you turn it over fairly regularly but, you don’t really systematically give them age to see how they are developing.

Whether a wine drinker is someone who cellars wine systematically or not, the image of cellaring wine is still very powerful. There are some very interesting and amusing anecdotal statistics given by anybody in the industry who serves wine to the public. The first statistic is the most commonly asked question about a wine - namely “Will it age

well?” The second statistic is that the vast majority of wines are drunk within a short time of purchasing them! Obviously the cellaring potential of a wine is being used as a quality measurement – even for a wine to be drunk short term.

Imagine the question from an earnest potential consumer – “Will this wine cellar well?” Consider the honest response – “This wine has been made to suit the majority of purchasers – it will keep nicely for a year or two, but it is fine to purchase and drink straight away”. Compare this to the alternative reply – “This wine has great potential and it is strongly recommended that it not be drunk for at least ten years”. The latter response has a better chance of impressing the consumer – even if they want to purchase a wine to drink that evening!

How do you know whether to drink a wine young or keep it?

If in doubt, drink it young! If you are going to age wines then you have to have some information about them. There should be a track record of ageing – look for commentaries on vertical tastings by experts. If you are going to taste the wine and then decide to keep a few for ageing then look for intense flavors, very good balance of flavors and high natural acidity in the wine. Acidity is a natural preservative.

### **What are the New Wines for new Food Styles?**

It wasn't that long ago that in Australia that the evening meal might have consisted of Leg of Lamb or the Roast Joint or some other meat and high calorie, high protein food. Such foods were inexpensive in the 1950's, 60's and 70's. With the migration after the Second World War of many from southern European, came diversity to Australian cooking. There are Asian and Mediterranean influences. Due to rising prices and interest in value for money, there is a move to cheaper meats. Health concerns have led to decreased fat consumption. A lot of people don't eat meat at all.

Australian food has moved to more savoury tastes. That means that some Australian rich, sweet red wines which used to be traditionally very popular with rich meat dishes, are now more special occasion wines. In terms of food matching, they match cheeses rather than main course dishes. The restaurant scene has moved to more casual bistro styles with less expensive dishes.

The change in food has resulted in an emphasis on new wines. There are all sorts of new wines - many in the Mediterranean style. Perhaps it is just because they are new and innovative that people are interested. Perhaps there is a reaction to the straight forward magnificent seven varieties – the well known Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Chardonnay, Riesling, Pinot noir, Shiraz and Cabernet. The new varieties are different and contrasting and interesting. They have savory dryer more mineral flavours. They team very well with the char-grilled Mediterranean cooking we see so much of now.

Look for whites made of Pinot Gris/Pinot Grigio, Viognier and others; reds of Tempranillo, Sangiovese and a host of Italian grapes.