

Something Old, Something New

One very rainy, grey, windy Melbourne morning, the Australian avant-garde of winemaking descended from all corners of the country to discuss the emergence of the alternative grape variety. Kim Chalmers (Chalmers), Steve Pannell (SC Pannell), Rollo Crittenden (Crittenden) and Brad Wehr (Amato Vino) revealed how they are breaking from the traditions of the past to redefine Australian wine as we know it.

So what is an emerging variety? Unlike emerging technology that sprung from the minds of geniuses, or emerging markets that grew to dominance in the global economy, emerging grape varieties have always existed, they've just grown in alternative regions to those we recognise today. A spot of history, geography and perspective helps to contextualise Australia's place in the puzzle.

The first traces of wine date back to Georgia in 6000 BC, Lebanon and Armenia in 4000 BC and Egypt and Iran around 3000 BC. The famous sites and slopes of Europe don't enter the picture until a millennium later, when the Phoenician and Egyptian traders introduced viticulture to Greece. Another thousand years later the Greeks venture to Italy. It is not until 800 BC when the Phoenicians bring viticulture to Spain, Portugal and world-famous France, making Europe the New World back in BC.

Pinot noir might be the king of Burgundy today; but back before Christ he was just a humble migrant fairing from the boot of Italy. Just like pinot, many vines today grow in regions outside their pre-European origins. Years of hard work and subsequent success resulted in the European New World becoming the masters of the trade. Today their ideology purveys throughout the world and they reign supreme as the Old World maestros in the eyes of the 21st century drinker.

Cue the New World...in the early 1800s James Busby brought over some of Australia's first vine cuttings. The humble migrant, pinot noir, was on the move again. Pinot and pals; chardonnay, riesling, shiraz and cabernet swapped the fertile French valleys for the big Red Rock. Far from home, the traditionally European grapes found themselves in foreign lands and began their life again as an Antipodean alternative. Year's later, hard work and subsequent successes have established pinot, chardonnay and their comrades as Australian.

Today, Australia finds its viticulture vulnerable to the threats and consequences of climate change. With summers getting hotter, rainfall less reliable and seasons less predictable some winemakers are planting alternative European varieties that are more appropriate than their traditionally Australian counterparts. At the vineyard level it is a smart move to increase adaptability as temperatures soar. For individual producers it spreads the risk of harvest spoil. Their actions will irrevocably change the Australian wine industry as we recognise it today. There are threats, challenges and successes to be had from top to toe of the supply chain; from the vineyard, through the winery and in distribution.

One of the family's leading the charge in viticulture innovation is the Chalmers, based in northern Victoria. The family focuses on finding the perfect match for vine and vineyard through innovation in small vineyard blocks and their own

nursery. What characteristics are they looking for in new varieties? There are lots of factors to consider, but how early or late the grape ripens is key to the success of a crop from hot vintage to hot vintage. Winemakers need grapes that can ripen early enough to be picked before temperatures rise or grapes that can ripen slow enough to outlast the heat. As droughts become more probable and storms less predictable the thickness of a grape's skin becomes critical. Thin skins easily split in a downpour and dry out in the heat, whilst pale skins can burn easily in the sun. Acidity is the backbone of a wine and acid levels plummet in excessive heat, leaving grapes that make blobby wines with no structure or ageing potential. Therefore grape varieties with naturally high acid retention are growing in popularity thanks to their reliability.

Big brand and stylised wines put Australian winemaking on the map. Our labelling methods prioritise varietal and stylistic individuality over regional expression. Exactly the opposite to our Old World friends. Steve Pannell believes if ever there is a time to refocus and prioritise regional expression in Australian wine; it's today. The soil, climate and geography of a region – known as the terroir – are the key characteristics that unlock a wine's individuality. They're the only characteristics that can't be replicated and thus should be celebrated and protected – especially from the Chinese! A refocus on region would mean Australian producers could grow fiano, nero d'avola and touriga that are praised for their true representation of site not just their Old World similarities. True Australian wine should be grape indiscriminate, and if our wines are to be competitive on an international stage Australian wine needs to be celebrated for regional purity, not stylistic expressions. How else can we sell pinot to the French and tempranillo to the Spanish?

Forget the Spanish; would a consumer in Coles or Uncle Dan's want to buy a Heathcote fiano over a Yarra chardonnay or a Clare Valley assyrtiko instead of a riesling? To start with, alternative varieties have wild and foreign names that are hard to pronounce and easily scare off the consumer. Even if they know how to say it, often they've no idea what to expect. Sommelier's struggle with identifying the best point of reference for a consumer; the grape's geographical origin, famous producers or a different wine with similar characteristics. It seems the emergence of alternative varietals magnifies the mystery of wine. Some have helped demystify the scene; Rollo's father Garry commercialised the first Italian wines in Australia, and thanks to breakthroughs like his, we already see some alternative varietals in our local bottle-o and bar. The more we see the more we'll recognise and the more daring we'll become. A sommelier jokes that people on dates used to pride themselves on wine knowledge, now they pride themselves on trying the unknown. It seems the Auzzie alternative is percolating the mainstream but how far off are we from playing the protagonist on the world stage and not just the support act?

As exciting as it seems; innovating is no easy feat. The smallest producers are taking the biggest risks; and in such a high capital-intensive industry the risks are substantial and the losses can be large. Winston Churchill once said 'success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm'. And failure's there are: Rollo imported various cuttings of albariño back in 2007 only to find out they were the less desirable savagnin. Today he makes three of the most experimental, and delicious expressions in the country. Brad's favourite wine in his portfolio is of Balkan origins; the slankamenka bela grape. It might roll off

the tongue in a lyrical fashion but when translated into English means 'smells like shit'. Steve recently pulled out fifty-year-old McLaren Vale Shiraz vines. Everyone said he was mad. Perhaps he is.

From crisis comes opportunity. In the face of a potentially catastrophic climate crisis our innovative viticulturists and pioneering producers are seeking out opportunities with raw enthusiasm. With a nod to the past and a jump into the unknown they are paving the way for an adventurous future that is equal part alternative, equal part traditional, but above all, Australian.

The vehicles that drove our discussion and steered the debate:

- Chalmers Vermentino 2018, Heathcote (VIC)
- Jim Barry Assyrtiko 2018, Clare Valley (SA)
- Ricca Terra Arinto 2017, Riverland SA
- Lark Hill Grüner Veltliner 2018, Canberra District (NSW)
- Amato Vino Slankamenka Bela 2016, Riverland (SA)
- Chalmers Fiano 2018, Heathcote (VIC)
- Crittenden 'Zumma' Savagnin 2017, Mornington Peninsula (VIC)
- Crittenden 'Cri de Coeur' Savagnin 2015, Mornington Peninsula (VIC)
- Crittenden 'Macvin' Savignin NV, Mornington Peninsula (VIC)
- Amato Vino Trousseau 2017, Margaret River (WA)
- S.C. Pannell Nebbiolo 2016, Adelaide Hills (SA)
- S.C. Pannell 'Nero Diavola' Nero d'Avola 2018, McLaren Vale (SA)
- Amato Vino Toreldego 2015, Margaret River (WA)
- Chalmers Aglianico 2016, Heathcote (VIC)
- Konpira Maru 'Kavorka' Saperavi 2017, South Burnett (QLD)