

WINE TIM WHITE

In search of the best-suited, most tasty vinifera species

Local drought-affected vignerons should look at the origins of grape cultivars from abroad.

Drought, fire, stress. Winegrowers are no less immune to the ravages of our most recent, nine-on decade-long drought than the rest of Australia's farmers.

Although you could argue that with wine being a far more discretionary part of our diet, it should be set aside and discussed quite separately to other agricultural staples.

Not that you'd get this argument in the traditional winegrowing countries of Europe, of course, where vines are as integral a part of the rural backyard as are cricket stumps in Australia.

In Europe they plant what's suited to the prevailing elements of the local environment. Varieties suited to warmer, drier conditions are planted in the hotter Mediterranean parts of Europe (depending on local tradition), while earlier ripening cultivars, those suited to cooler, wetter conditions, are planted in the north.

I recall asking a vineyard owner on the wet and humid south coast of NSW about eight years ago why they'd planted roussanne and marsanne. They replied saying, quite rightly, that these so-called "Rhône varieties" were becoming very popular. I agreed but questioned why on earth you'd plant grape varieties which thrive in hot, dry summer conditions in an area notorious for its high humidity and summer rains? They'd not even thought about that aspect of it.

There are regions of Australia, though, where there is an ingrained and inherited local winegrowing lore.

If you stop by McLaren Vale in South Australia you won't find old, bush-vine grenaches planted directly on the local watercourses. Why? Because in the days before profligate irrigation, the old growers knew that grenache not only performed well in drier parts of the region, but that it performed at its best without wet feet. There were other varieties – cabernet sauvignon and shiraz – which had a much greater need for a more regular feed of H₂O.

It's no surprise really, as grenache is a grape of France's hot and drier southern Rhône, so it thrives there. As it does under the



name of garnacha in Spain and as cannonau on Sardinia.

Looking forward rather than backward, although we always need to be aware of both, there are growers in Australia looking at other southern European traditional cultivars – to grow vines that achieve a more natural fruit balance in hot dry conditions, but also have an inherent, inherited ability to withstand the rigours of prolonged drought.

Some of the most interesting results could come from the southern Italian red trifecta of aglianico, negroamaro, and nero d'avola. (I don't mention cannonau – grenache – here because it's a proven, traditional success). Of these, it is nero d'avola from hot,

dry Sicily that most excites me. It seems to combine some of the succulence of grenache, even pinot noir, with shiraz-like spiciness and gorgeous fruit opulence. It loves the heat and responds by delivering wines that are rich and full of life.

Now it's true that fashionable "international" varieties are found across Europe in non-indigenous areas. But while many winegrowers have trialled such internationals as cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay, many are reverting to the regional staples, because that is what grows and performs the best.

We should maybe look back to vinifera's origins – it's not indigenous to Australia after all – so that we can move forward.

WHAT TO DRINK

Donnafugata Sherazade 2005 (Sicily, Italy)

Lots of dark fruit: concentrated blueberries and raisin, and a waft of coffee bean. Excellent fruit weight on the palate; really lush forest berries, with subtle white pepper and dry, building tannins. There are caramelised flavours and fresher fruit flavours, along with savoury bits and the right amount of grip. A blend of nero d'avola and syrah and one to drink over the next year. 94/100, \$28. Synthetic closure.

Tasca d'Almerita Regaiaali Nero d'Avola 2006 (Sicily, Italy)

Attractive raspberry and blackberry

couls, plus mace-like spice. Really pure with wet stone smells too. The same dark forest fruit coats the tongue but, although this red is sweet-fruited, it is dry finishing. Polished, but still maintaining an honest edge. Smart stuff. 94/100, \$30. Natural cork – shame it isn't under screwcap or Diam.

Chalmers Aglianico 2005 (Murray Darling, NSW)

Cedary and blueberry muffin smelling; an interesting mix of sweet and savoury. There's a sniff of celery salt too. Same in the mouth and quite tangy with a celery and orange peel edge, although there's plenty of

plumper fruitcake flavours too. This is an interesting red and shows how the variety can perform in our hotter regions. 90/100, \$22. Diam technical cork.

Gembree Vineyards Cadenza Grenache Tempranillo Shiraz 2006 (McLaren Vale, SA)

This is complex: stewed plum fruit-smelling, prosciutto meaty, hot brick dusty, and with dry spices. Has a lush, sweet-soy tasting palate, flinty smoky with lots of caramelised berry fruit. There's balancing sharp edge to it, though, and the finish is walnutty and figgy. Works well. 94/100, \$26. Screwcap.

