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WINE

Red that packs a punch

It all started in the vitarium (grape variety museum) at San Felice winery in the 1980s, where several hundred Tuscan grape varieties were planted in a bid to save them from extinction. It worked. Oenologist Leonardo Bellaccini points out that the rows of vines are part of an extensive gene pool that will ensure their survival.

Most turned out not to be suitable for wine but several, including the red pignitello, shone. Pignitello is an ancient variety whose name comes from the shape of its cluster, which resembles a small fist or "pugno".

The variety had been brought back to life but the question was finding the best way to handle it. Easy, says Bellaccini: just treat it with respect. It is fermented in 50% large format oak (tonneau) and the rest in stainless steel. The wine is then aged for 20 months in tonneau, about 40% new oak, before allowing it to settle in bottles for a year.

In 2003, San Felice made its first commercial vintage. Pignitello

makes a brilliant single-variety wine, but Bellaccini says it will also play a part in the chianti classico blend. Part of the vitarium's purpose is to allow other producers access to cuttings; early days yet but several, including Cerro, have planted pignitello.

I talked to Bellaccini at the launch of the Gambero Rosso wine guide, one of Italy's most influential, in which the 2004 pignitello had just scored the highest ranking. He was thrilled, saying: "This ancient variety might just prove itself noble after all."

While it's exciting to be one of the few to taste a wine, the good news is the pignitello is now available here. Enoteca Sileno imports San Felice wines and they are available at the Carlton shop; by next year, the chianti wines will also be available. And Boccaccio Cellars in Balwyn is also stocking the pignitello.

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SAN FELICE PIGNITELLO 2004 \$100

A medium-bodied red with an alluring red-black colour with savoury nuances, some stewed fruits but not overripe, coffee, touch of Italianesque herbal notes, a hint of violets with ripe, slightly grainy tannins and cleansing acidity.



SAN FELICE VERMENTINO 2007 \$30

A splash of sauvignon blanc in this crisp white adds to the aromatics more than anything. There are hints of flowers, sage with a citrus line and clean acidity. Quite soft on the palate and lovely but, gee, this would be so much better in screwcap.



CHALMERS VERMENTINO 2008 \$22

Arguably the best Aussie vermentino on the market (sure, we don't make many). Terrific on its own or with food. Spicy, aromatic with hints of white flowers and textural but nothing heavy; it has a fresh finish and fine acidity.

