

Australian winemakers on parade in Paso Robles



The sommeliers busy checking the 'Pink' lunch rosés.

By Laurie Martin

Hospice du Rhône (HdR), an annual international celebration of Rhône variety wines, held in Paso Robles, California, is not your average wine event. It has seminars (or master-classes or structured tastings – call them what you will) and mass tastings where all are welcome to attend for a fee. But unlike most other wine conventions, this event has a personality and soul that seduces participants, leaving them wanting more.

The event is a celebration of not just the wines made from the 22 recognised grape varieties of the Rhône Valley, but of the people who make them and the camaraderie that is shared with all the people who buy, recommend, stock and drink these wines. If you make a distinctive wine, retailing for more than \$30 from any of these varieties in Australia and you want to sell it in America, this is the event to attend.

HdR runs over two days (three including the Thursday night's annual 10 pin bowling competition) consisting of two seminars in the morning, a communal lunch, then tastings in the afternoon on both the Friday and Saturday. The Friday night collection of wine dinners, known as 'Dine Around', are legendary events while the Saturday night farewell barbecue sees food and entertainment in keeping with each year's theme. This year it was 'From Roussanne with Love' – allowing for some 007-come-casino action.

Dave Powell (winemaker of the Barossa Valley's Torbreck) has a larrikin sense of humour and a dry delivery that elicited a

number of chuckles from his presentation focusing on *terroir*, blending and the benefits of working with fruit from single vineyards. Powell presented in conjunction with the charmingly modest Frenchman Louis Barruol of Chateau St Cosme, in the southern Rhône.

Having first been in the US 25 years ago working in vineyards, Powell now makes three trips to the US each year, encompassing two months in total out of the five he spends out of Australia.

In order to better control the destiny of his label and wines, Powell and export manager wife Liz Russell, who worked in the US for 20 years, took the decision to employ his own representatives in the US, import and warehouse his own wine and deal directly with distributors in the various States. While this involved a substantial investment in terms of cash-flow, he believes the Torbreck method of selling into the US markets has now settled down and is running well.

"Without meaning to sound arrogant, everyone at HdR knows my wines so I am unlikely to sell any more in the US as a direct result of being here," Powell said. "Regardless, I love coming to this event because it is a lot of fun and I get to mix with my peers from around the world on a social basis (including some from Australia) and come away with some new ideas."

Chris Loxton is a winemaker with his own eponymous label in Glen Ellen, in the Sonoma Valley, and has lived in California for 25 years, after growing up on vineyards in South Australia. A physicist by training in Australia, it wasn't until he went to the US that he became interested in making wine, so undertook



American-based Australian Chris Loxton has been making Shiraz for more than 15 years and says he is “still learning”.



Dave Powell, of Torbreck, after a 2am finish, a 9am seminar and the auction lunch!

studies through UC Davis and worked vintages in the Sonoma and Barossa Valleys before establishing his own label.

Loxton was impressed by Dave Powell. “I went to a seminar he was conducting, prepared to hate him for being so successful in what seems like a relatively short time, but found out he was a really humble guy who said ‘this is what works for me with my grapes’ but was ready to acknowledge that it might not suit everyone,” Loxton said.

That would seem to sum up the event. The winemakers pointed to the fruit they work with as being unique and the thing that determines the quality of their wines. The wine sellers made the point that it is the winemaker personalities who lead consumers to try their wines in the first place. And everyone said they’d come back as soon as they could!

SNAPSHOTS OF WINEMAKERS SHOWCASING THEIR WARES

Allister Ashmead – Elderton Wines

This was Ashmead’s third HdR – he participates every second year and regards HdR as an event where contacts and connections can be made, rather than pretending to be a serious trade show, so it is an event to enjoy. He visits the US twice a year. Elderton also participates approximately every second year by invitation in *Wine Spectator*’s the New York Wine Experience.

Mike Opdahl – Joshua Tree Imports

As importers of New World wines, Opdahl commented that there is a lot of Shiraz in the marketplace and felt Shiraz sales had plateaued. He said the high end of the market was very tough but the \$10-20 sector was booming.

He was pouring 2005 Schubert Estate Goose Yard Block Shiraz and 2005 Rolf Binder Hanisch Shiraz.

Opdahl’s view is that Australia’s major competition comes from Argentina and South Africa and other US producers of Shiraz. Argentine Malbec is selling strongly given these wines “rated 90-92” points and sell for around \$12. With the current exchange rates, he felt there is no comparable Australian wine around that price point, although the average consumer is very

price conscious. Entry level and occasional-use consumers are internet savvy and tend to buy on ratings whether they understand them or not.

His advice to Australian producers who want to sell \$50 bottles of Shiraz to the US market is that they visit in person and promote their wine – especially to restaurants and small distributors.

He also suggested the US market is generally fickle and tends to like something new. He gave the example of the Schubert 2004 vintage having a rating of 96 points and a price of \$85/bottle that sold out quickly. The 2005 came out with the same rating but he is finding it difficult to move at the same price, as those who bought it first time around are now probably trying something else.

Joshua Tree has recently bought the Schubert vineyard, largely to secure supply in the US, happy that it is “over the road from Dave Powell (Torbreck)” and that the fruit used to go to Torbreck wines.

When asked where the next major growth in wine consumption is going to come from in the US, his view is that it has to come from new consumers in the sub-45 age group, as he doubted there is much growth left in the Baby Boomer market.

Peter Fraser – Yangarra and Kinton Wines

Fraser is a flying winemaker who is in the Kinton (Santa Maria) winery six times a year. Apart from showing both labels at the two tastings, Fraser also presented a selection of Yangarra and Kinton wines at a Dine Around dinner on the Friday night.

Hosted by the owners of both labels, Kendall Jackson, the dinner was a great opportunity to see the expression of *terroir* in the Syrah/Shiraz wines accompanying the meal. Both wines were made from fruit picked to the same flavour profile, sugar and acid requirements and were made the same way. The resulting wines were significantly different (the McLaren Vale Shiraz had more fruit definition with notes of black pepper compared with the Santa Maria Syrah) and, following a vertical tasting of 15 vintages of Beaucastel covering a 21-year period, a

The Rhône varieties

In case you couldn't name them all off the top of your head, the varieties are as follows. Pronunciations are given for some of the more unfamiliar varieties.

- 1 **Grenache Noir** – big-bodied, supple and rich characters of strawberry, raspberry, blackberry, black pepper.
- 2 **Grenache Gris** – full-bodied, light in colour, with delicate characters of strawberry, cherry, rose petal.
- 3 **Syrah/Shiraz** – highly coloured, firmly structured and aromatic characters of plum, raspberry, blueberry, blackcurrant, violet, roasted meats, smoke, chocolate, pepper, anise.
- 4 **Viognier** – big-bodied, very aromatic, complex characters of apricot, musk, peaches, grapefruit, lychee, papaya, mango, tropical flowers.
- 5 **Mourvèdre** – tannic, deeply coloured, aromatic characters of black currant, dark cherries, leather, smoke, earth.
- 6 **Roussanne** – firmly structured, powerful, rich characters of apricot, honey, almond, nutmeg, honeysuckle, iris.
- 7 **Carignane Noir** (care-ig-non no-our) – tannic, solid acidity and good colour with characters of cherry, raspberry, pepper.
- 8 **Marsanne** – broad palate, soft and rich with characters of peach, nectarine, stone fruits, tuberose, sweet nuts.
- 9 **Cinsault Noir** (sahn-so no-our) – elegant, soft and lightly aromatic with characters of strawberry, raspberry, smoke, earth.
- 10 **Ugni Blanc** (ewn-yee blan) – delicate fruit and good acidity with characters of pear, honey-dew melon, earth.
- 11 **Muscardin** – floral, aromatic and firmly structured with characters of rose petal, barnyard, earth.
- 12 **Picpoul Blanc** (peek-pool blan) – floral and soft with aromatic characters of pear, earth, lily, daisy, wildflowers.
- 13 **Picpoul Noir** – floral and elegant with aromatic characters of rose, violet, dark cherry.
- 14 **Bourboulenc** (burr-buh-lan) – light-bodied and delicately floral with characters of peach, melon, earth.
- 15 **Camarese** – (cam-are-ess) firm, tannins and delicate aromatics of pepper, spice.
- 16 **Clairette Blanc** – (claret blan) big-bodied, floral and aromatic characters of honeysuckle, tropical flowers, tropical fruits.
- 17 **Vaccarèse** (vac-car-ess) aromatic, firmly tannic and floral with pepper, spice, earth, smoke.
- 18 **Grenache Blanc** – big-bodied, soft and delicate with characters of peach, melon, pear.
- 19 **Terret Noir** – (tare-it no-our) delicate, perfumed, bright acidity with characters of rose petal, lavender, dark berries, spice.
- 20 **Muscat à Petits Grains** – (mus-cat ah pet-eet grahn) elegant, aromatic and floral with characters of musk, honey, honeysuckle, lily, stonefruit.
- 21 **Clairette Rose** – (clare-et ro-se) light aromatics, with soft fruit notes and characters of strawberry, cherry, rose petal.
- 22 **Counoise Noir** – (coon-wahz no-our) lively acidity, spice and richness with characters of raspberry, cherry, cranberry.

Source: *Hospice du Rhône*.

representative of the host was inspired to suggest to guests that they share their views of the wines relative to major events in their lives.

While this was a rather unique concept in the art of wine description, it tended to fall apart quickly when one of the guests referred briefly (and jokingly!) to her first 'acid trip'.

As an interesting aside, Fraser observed the primary difference between Australian and Mexican (Californian) cellar rats was that Australians are more flexible and intuitive, while the Mexicans are very reliable and respond well to training.

Fraser now loves HdR after his first visit and is excited about the prospect of encouraging a group of McLaren Vale Grenache producers to organise a seminar at a future event.

ENSURING THE FUTURE OF THE HDR EVENT

The Saturday lunchtime auction held to raise funds for the continued staging of HdR is a true expression of how participants feel about the event. The auction lots consist of wines or restaurant meals donated and bought by people who want to see HdR thrive.

This auction is where premiums are placed not just on the

scarcity of the wine (or format that it is being offered in) but also on the personalities producing it. Three double magnums and an imperial of wines from Torbrek sold for US\$7000, compared with less than \$3000 if you just wanted to buy these wines in 750mL bottles.

It is this sort of free-spirited bidding that raised more than US\$110,000 in approximately 30 minutes and an almost perfect expression of the passion that participants share for this event. The income from the auction helps to keep the event at a reasonable price for everyone to attend in successive years.

The costs associated with providing breakfasts, lunches and staging the seminars are quite considerable even when taking into account that most of the labour is undertaken by volunteers, including the professional sommeliers who come from all over California, Las Vegas and New York to oversee the wines being poured at the seminars and lunches. While Reidel is a long-term sponsor, and the cost of having Reidel tasting glasses must therefore be somewhat mitigated, the cleaning and polishing of this stemware after each seminar is \$0.45 per glass. At 5000 glasses per seminar, that's a lot of cleaning costs.