

the hot drop



TOURIGA IS A GREAT NEW PORTUGUESE VARIETAL ALREADY BEING GROWN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA. BUT ARE WE READY?
BY MATT WALLACE, BUYER FOR PREMIUM WINES DIRECT.

There's a decent argument that anyone planting significant quantities of Touriga Nacional has rocks in their head or at the very least, deep pockets. Touriga Nacional is a challenging varietal to grow and market. In the vineyard, it is both vigorous and difficult to ripen. It has a high skin to juice ratio, so the harvest seems to shrink as it passes through the crusher. It is also most commonly used in the production of fortified wines, which for producers, offers at best a low return/long term investment. Also, Australia is already blessed with Grenache and Shiraz, each of which can each produce exceptional examples of Rosé, red and fortified.

Happily, drinkers are increasingly embracing; even demanding new flavours and textures. Old Mill Estate is listening, fashioning cutting edge pink and black wines from the variety. In the near future, they will also release their first fortified. Evidence from the 2007 and 2008 vintages also suggests that Touriga has good potential as a climate change variety. At the very least, Old Mill have demonstrated that Touriga is ready for us!

Fired up

Old Mill Estate's Peter Widdop says "There was no bolt from the blue - Stuart (Blackwell) from St Hallett wanted us to plant a bit for him - about five acres, but we put in 15. I tasted their first Touriga Rosé in tank and thought, 'beauty!' I could have sat there drinking out of the tank all day."

Peter's not the only one inspired. Based on tasting Old Mill's early Rosés, Matt Broomhead (former Coriole winemaker) and Steven Pannell are buying fruit from Old Mill for use in their own projects. Steve has done so for three successive vintages. That's two

heavy hitters getting behind the variety but they weren't the first. In 2006 Cheong Liew happened across Old Mill's second Rosé (the 2006) and opted to include it as part of the Grange's \$260 degustation menu. Spectacularly, given Rosé's reputation as an early drinking style, Cheong included the 2005 on his degustation menu in 2008 as a three year old wine. A fine choice, as the 05 continues to drink beautifully today. The 05 is now honeyed, textured and complex- with a little savoury-ness to boot.

A point of difference

The Widdops have felt some commercial pressure to increase the Rosé's residual sugar levels but are holding firm. It might be easier to get in the door with a sugary Rosé, but there's already a lot of confected pink drops which can happily be consumed from a frosty jar. Chatting with Peter recently, he seemed more determined than ever to keep their very special point of difference. The 06, 07 and 08 vintages are all impressive - offering spicy notes on the nose, each presenting varying degrees of raspberry and maraschino cherry, taut acid, bony yet delicate structure and a goose bump-inducing dry finish. These wines have the structure to cope with barbecued meats and enough delicacy to drink as a summery treat - just the trick for those of us jaded by the offerings of the J.A.R. (just another Rosé) club. As Peter says, "It is just a matter of getting the wine into people's mouths."

Branching out

"With a few vintages of Rosé under our belt, we thought we'd have a go at making a red. We'd had a few winemakers taste the fruit and shake their heads saying "I'm not sure what we'd do with this". Then

we hooked up with Duane Coates who had had some experience with the variety in Portugal so we bought some older American oak and had a crack at it.

"We were confident the experiment would work because Touriga tends toward massive fruit and tannin weight but is also typically very supple and approachable as a young wine. So long as it is not excessively oaked, it should drink beautifully as a young wine. It also has the capacity to age slowly as it develops additional layers of complexity and interest."

The first release red (2007) is an excellent wine. In spite of the big tannins it's light on its feet and quite graceful. On the nose, it offers an explosion of Chinese spice and blueberries- quite unlike any other Australian red. There's also a whiff of white pepper and just the faintest waft of oak. The mouth feel is big to begin with. As the wine crosses your tongue it tapers and refines slowly as though the wine's strident nature is changing as it slides across your palate. This wine (which already has one gold medal on the mantle) is a pleasure to drink now and suits a range of dishes, particularly antipasto and chargrilled meats.

As a fortified

"Quite a lot of Aussie winemakers have experimented with using Portuguese varieties in fortified wine production. The most profound of these is Touriga Nacional, which is what we've got in the ground at the moment. We're considering planting a bit of



Touriga Francesca too; it's a bit lighter bodied and has even more exaggerated aromatics," notes Peter.

Vineyards in the famed Rutherglen region including Stanton and Killeen and Baileys have already embraced these Portuguese varieties. Stanton and Killeen's VP features a mix of Shiraz and Durif along with Touriga and several of the Tinta varieties. It is one of Australia's best balanced, most profound and complex fortified wines. There will always be a place for Shiraz and Grenache in fortified production but Touriga can add very positively to this segment. Touriga seems to retain ripe yet restrained fresh fruit characters at the high sugar level required for fortified production. The finished product is often less cloying, more compelling and complex.

The Old Mill Fortified (tasted as a barrel sample) is more restrained than most Australian VP styles but also exceedingly generous. The nose offers a hint of the spicy aromatics on offer in the dry red, along with a whack of reduced blackcurrant bolstered by spindles of aristocratic spirit. It is intense, long and refined – quite beautiful already but should age very well too.

Climate change

In it's homeland in Portugal's Douro valley, the variety produces exceptional fruit in an extremely hot climate. Add the rocky 'schistous' which captures and re-radiates heat into the fruiting zone, and you have very challenging growing conditions to which

the variety is obviously naturally suited. To complement the vine's natural synergy with rugged conditions, Peter splits the canopy, trellising most of the canes upward, with around 20 per cent trellised outward from about a foot above the fruiting zone. "This acts much like a roof over the tool shed, protecting the fruit from direct sunlight, preventing the canopy from choking itself and allowing enough green growth to perfectly ripen the fruit," says Peter.

The furnace like conditions of the 2008 growing season definitely put South Australian vineyards through their paces. For many vignerons the (then) record heat wave punished vines, stalling flavour development while sugar levels raced ahead. While there will be plenty of good and even exceptional wines made, many 08 wines are carrying the double albatross of excessive alcohol and minimal fruit intensity even after reverse osmosis had been employed. Old Mill's Touriga suffered relatively little damage and ripened at a comparatively sedate pace.

Vintage 2009 has delivered even more challenging conditions and whilst not putting a smile on Peter and Vicky's faces, has given them additional confidence. A week after the early February heatwave the vines were coping well, yields remain good and ripening continues steadily.



To order Old Mill wines please contact Matt Wallace at Premium Wines Direct on (08) 8352 3094 or email matt.wallace@winedirect.com.au

The 2007 Rosé is currently available, along with limited quantities of the 2005 and 2006. The 2008 Dry Red is scheduled for release in May 2009. The 2007 Fortified is scheduled for release in April 2009.

