Canberra - Australian politics, and wines of unusual subtlety

23 Nov 2004 by JR

Sue Carpenter, maker of award-winning Lark Hill Pinot Noir, the delicate red burgundy grape, met me at Canberra airport in her Pinot-coloured Jaguar V12. Her voice may be fluting, her look more rustic bag lady than Gucci bag lady, but she is not short of an opinion. Virtually her first words to me were 'Some people think we fluke it. See, the thing is we're feral academics. And academics don't fluke it.'

If, like Sue and David Carpenter, you have a clutch of letters after your name and have spent more than 15 years making wine in Canberra, a place that most people, let alone 'some people', think is a joke, it is perhaps natural to be defensive.

Other Carpenter *bons mots* include 'If we were as close to Melbourne as we are to Canberra we could sell our Pinot Noir for twice as much. Awareness is the problem.'

Well, Mrs Carpenter, allow me to do my little bit to create some awareness of the unique and admirable qualities of wines made on the gentle green hills around the Australian capital.

Strictly speaking it is not quite right to talk about Canberra wineries and vineyards, for almost all of those included in the official Canberra District appellation are in fact not clustered around the broad-avenued capital (Ottawa without the excitement) but over the border in New South Wales.

Outside Australia Canberra is hardly known at all as a wine producer. Within Australia it is only now being recognised as one of New South Wales' many 'new' cool, high altitude wine regions (up to 860 metres in the case of Lark Hill) like Orange, Tumbarumba and Hilltops.

But in fact the first vines went in to this extremely varied wine region in 1971 (long before most Australians had even heard of Chardonnay). Cambridge biochemist Dr John Kirk emigrated to work for the CSIRO, the Australian government research organisation, and found himself wondering why there was no wine industry here. He was struck by the similarity between Bordeaux and Murrumbateman (600m above sea level and considerably warmer than Lark Hill). 'All I wanted to do was answer the question "If I planted vines here, what would the wine taste like?"' is how he explains the rush of blood to the head that saw him and another CSIRO scientist, Edgar Riek at Lake George winery, plant Canberra District's first vines.

Drought plagued the first few vintages to such an extent that 1976 was Dr Kirk's first commercial vintage and 1990 the first year in which he felt confident enough to release a varietal Shiraz, even though he had first planted the variety in 1972. Quantities produced were so small he could only afford to enter it in the smaller of Australia's all-important wine shows, but the first vintage was voted Best Wine of Show at Griffith - no mean feat. The winery name, Clonakilla, and swirling graphic on the label both look vaguely aboriginal but in fact owe their inspiration to the Kirk family's Irish roots.

Jeremy, a Rhodes scholar in constitutional law and the first of the six Kirk sons to be born in Australia, was only 14 when he suggested his father's wine enterprise should specialise in 'an unusual but good' grape variety. Kirk Senior duly studied the available texts and came up with the white grape of the northern Rhône, Viognier, which he planted in 1986.

It took Jeremy's older brother Tim, who has been lured from teaching physical education at a Jesuit school in Melbourne to run Clonakilla but had toured the Rhône Valley, to suggest blending a little of this Viognier in with the Shiraz in homage to the traditional recipe for France's once-ethereal Côte Rôtie. The exotic (for Australia) moniker 'Shiraz Viognier' first appeared on a Clonakilla label with the 1992 vintage and has steadily been garnering fans. Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier 2001 has just been voted Wine of the Year by Australia's best-selling wine guide, the *Penguin Good Australian Wine Guide*.

The wine is soft, fragrant and rather haunting and the choice was perhaps made deliberately as a laudable reaction to Australia's stereotypically gigantic, tannic, monster Shirazes. Like Lark Hill's success with the feral academics' reserve 2000 Pinot Noir, labelled Exultation and judged Best Pinot of Show at the Canberra Show this year, it will certainly help to make Canberra District's unusually subtle wines better known.

Nor has a major investment by one of the country's biggest wine producers BRL Hardy (who value Canberra fruit highly enough to have used some of it in its flagship Eileen Hardy Chardonnay) done any harm to the number of vine-growers and growing reputation of this unusually cool Australian wine region.

Lark Hill wines are imported into the UK by New World Wines of London SE1.

Clonakilla Shiraz/Viognier 2001 is available in the UK at about £24 a bottle from the following merchants:

Bennett's, Chipping Campden (tel 01386 840 392)
Bentalls, Kingston (tel 020 8546 2002)
Haynes, Hanson & Clark, London (tel 020 7259 0102)
Harvey Nichols & Co Ltd, London (tel 020 7201 8596)
Martinez Fine Wines, Ilkley, Yorks (tel 01274 393813)
Moriarty Vintners, Cardiff (tel 02920 229996)
Philglas & Swiggot, London (tel 020 7924 4494)

US importer of Clonakilla is The Australian Premium Wine Collection at www.tapwc.com.au

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