

Joseph - the fizz that defies all the rules

9 Apr 2008 by Richard Hemming

Like many wine aficionados, I am perpetually intrigued by esoteric blends. They may never infiltrate the likes of Bordeaux, but who could resist trying screwballs like Sangiovese-Pinot Noir-Shiraz (*Rageous* 2006, Quealy Estate, Mornington Peninsula), or Pinot Noir-Merlot-Shiraz-Viognier (*Ona* 2005, Anakena, Casablanca Valley)?

I once spent an evening with a couple of like-minded wine folk dreaming up the most outrageous blend possible. Our resultant masterpiece was a Rondo, Ugni Blanc and botrytised Bourboulenc rosé, oak-chipped, hyper-oxidised, madeirised and fortified, then bottle-fermented, lees-aged and in one final horrifying step, bottled under *screwcap*.

We called it The Mindblender. Everyone agreed at the time that it would be phenomenal. Everyone agreed the morning after to never speak of it again.

Luckily, no such fate befell the conception of Primo Estate's **Joseph Sparkling Red**. It began life during a dinner conversation in 1989 about the 'treasures of Australia' when Primo supremo Joe Grilli had an idea.

Shortly afterwards, three oak hogsheads (holding 2,600 litres each) in Virginia, north of Adelaide, were being filled to create the then most idiosyncratic blend in the whole wine world. Hundreds of bottles of old Aussie reds were being decanted and poured in. Cabernets, Merlots and Shirazes; Coonawarras, Langhorns and Virginians; '60s, '70s and '80s. All of them were sought and bought at auction by Joe Grilli to create the mother of all mother wines.

And there's more: every vintage of their Amarone-style **Moda** goes in, as does their top McLaren Vale Shiraz **Angels' Gully**. In this way, they keep the barrels topped up in deliberate imitation of sherry's solera system, and maintain an average age in bottle of 20 years.

Every 12 months, a small proportion is drawn off, bottle fermented and aged for two years on its lees. The final touch before release is the liqueur d'expedition: classic old Australian vintage port, each bottle manually disgorged and dosaged by Joe Grilli's own hand.

The result is a sparkling red unlike any other. This is serious wine, a masterpiece of blending and hand-crafted attention to detail. It is rich, lengthy, balanced, stylish, profound and delicious. The age of the mother wine gives depth, complexity and softness. The dosage of 20g/l (far drier than average for sparkling red) is subtle and integrated. The mousse is delicate, refined, sophisticated.

True, it is red and fizzy, a style that most British drinkers automatically dismiss, myself included. But most British drinkers haven't drunk this [although it has been imported here since, I'd say, the early 1990s, to great acclaim; try Oz Wines and Noel Young – JR]. About 300 dozen were released for the ninth disgorgement in September 2007, of which only 20 cases were sent to the UK. Australia has already sold out.

Joseph Sparkling Red both defines and defies its genre: an iconic Australian unlike any of its peers. It confidently stands shoulder to shoulder with the world's classics, and therefore proudly holds top rank in my wine canon. But then again, so did The Mindblender, albeit briefly.

My quest for new and unusual blends continues, but in future I will concentrate more on seeking them out than dreaming them up. There may be more misses than hits, but when they succeed like **Joseph** they truly deserve a space in any discerning wine rack.