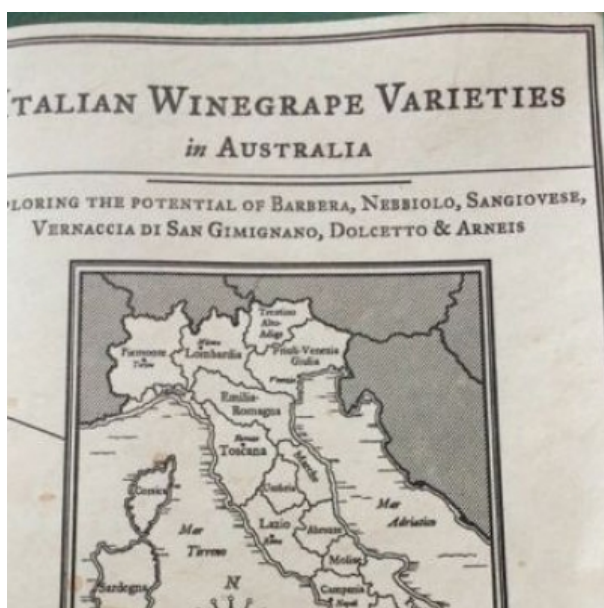




Written by
Walter Speller
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Italian grape varieties in Australia - part 1



12 Mar For today's Throwback Thursday, because Walter's four-part series has been so enthusiastically received, we are republishing the first part of his series chronicling the rise of Italian grape varieties in Australia, which brings together a thirst for diversity as well as one possible response to climate change. It was first published on 23 Feb.

Once upon a time, when international grape varieties were at the height of their success and varietal labelling de rigueur, an Italian winemaker complained to me that Italy didn't have any truly great grape varieties because 'they don't travel well'. What he meant was that at that time not a single Italian variety had achieved the international status of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, because unlike their French counterparts, according to him, none of them thrived outside their homeland.

Establishing whether a variety is capable of making great wine solely on the basis of its capacity to adapt to different countries is absurd in my view, but it is one of the reasons why the Italians didn't – and by and large still don't – take their local varieties seriously. Tragically, this absurd idea is reinforced by a wine law that explicitly encourages the blending of French varieties into almost any Italian wine. To make matters worse, the law describes this blending practice as *amigliorare*, meaning 'to improve'. This grotesque misunderstanding, caused by sky-high yields in the vineyard combined with a general lack of knowledge, has been so dominant in Italy in the last 50 years that it has eradicated whole swathes of indigenous varieties with hundreds of others on the brink of extinction.

For particular things I seem to have the memory of an elephant, so when Jane Faulkner, a Melbourne-based wine writer specialising in Italian wines, asked me to be the international judge at the Australian Alternative Wine Variety Show (AAWVS), which she chairs, and taste dozens of Italian varieties 'Made in Australia', I immediately accepted. It would give me the unique possibility to find out first-hand how Italian varieties flourish far away from their home, and, with any luck, to settle an old score.

While the general misconception of Australia as a hot, sun-baked continent with life only possible at the coastal fringes persists, in actual fact it has a diverse range of climates, exposures and elevations, not to mention the oldest soil formation on the planet. If you want to know what the Alps will look like in a couple of hundred million years, just go to Australia. Still, large parts of this continent are broadly Mediterranean in terms of climate, which should, in theory at least, make it extremely suitable for growing Mediterranean varieties.

When looking at it from this point of view, Australia's preference for French varieties seems rather odd. This fact was already noted in 1999 in a slim, but groundbreaking book called *Italian Winegrape Varieties in Australia* [sic], which argued that French grapes' dominance was even odder considering the large number of Italian immigrants to Australia over the last 100 years or so. Except for a few historical plantings in the 1880s of Dolcetto in Victoria and South Australia, which had all but disappeared by the turn of the century, the Italian immigrants don't seem to have had the foresight to bring cuttings of their own vines with them.

The instigator and one of the four co-authors of this little book is Garry Crittenden, a viticulturist with a background in horticultural research and in 1982 one of the first to plant vines in cool-climate Mornington Peninsula on the estate that would carry his name. Crittenden's first plantings were Cabernet Sauvignon but at the beginning of the 1990s the estate started to produce a Barbera.

I particularly remember this Barbera. At around the same time I was working as a sommelier in an Italian restaurant in Berlin and often travelled to London, where I noticed this wine in an Oddbins, the most adventurous wine merchant in the UK at the time. After having tasted it, I wrote to Crittenden that I liked it, but that it didn't remind me in the least of its Italian counterpart. Unfortunately, I lost Crittenden's answer, but I do remember that he was upset. All of this came back to me when Jane Faulkner sent me my programme of visits to several producers specialising in Italian varieties. I ran my eyes down the list and there it was: Crittenden.

The book that Crittenden co-wrote with Jim Hardie, at that time director of the Co-operative Research Centre for Viticulture, Peter Dry and Alex McKay is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it questions the hegemony of the French varieties, which must have equalled heresy at the time. But based on the book's, admittedly rudimentary, climate analysis and comparison,

these varieties may not always have been the most appropriate choice.

The agricultural scientist [John Gladstones](#) explains in the book's foreword that at the time this type of analysis had surprisingly little support in Australia. Unhindered by laws such as the European ones that minutely dictate exactly which variety may be cultivated where, Australian producers always had total freedom to plant whatever and wherever they liked. Or, in Gladstones's own words: 'investment promoters prefer not to acknowledge natural constraints to mass plantings wherever it suits them'. According to him, a more systematic approach would at the very least reduce the cost and time involved in preventable errors. These often take time to become evident, and, in the case of McLaren Vale, they have brought about the soul-searching of an entire region as well as the introduction of completely new varieties.

Without going into great detail, the book analyses the classic Italian growing regions for six Italian grape varieties (Barbera, Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, Vernaccia di San Gimignano, Dolcetto and Arneis) in terms of heat summation (the total number of hours of sunshine during the vine's growing cycle), humidity and, very roughly, soil composition. On the basis of this data it identifies, again in a fairly rudimentary way, several climate bands in Australia that show some similarity to the Italian ones. Jim Hardie warns that no one should expect precise replication and the final result will not be wines which are identical to those from Italy: 'The process may not identify the subtler qualities of the ultimate wines, but can undoubtedly predict generic potential.' This perfectly describes the error I made when I expected Crittenden's Barbera to taste like a Piemontese one. Instead, I should have asked myself: 'In what way is it different? And even more importantly, 'Do I like it?'

The nitty gritty of data comparison between Italy and Australia aside, one of the most fascinating aspects of the book is a generalisation of the difference in taste between French and Italian wines. It argues that French wines are 'fruity', with a soft mid palate, while Italian wines are 'savory' and with a clear tannic structure. I am convinced that few, if any, producers that I visited during my stay in Australia had read the book. It has admittedly been out of print for a long time, but literally everyone I talked to mentioned savouriness, tannins and, the new sacred cow, acidity in relation to the Italian grape varieties they were growing.

Although written in 1999, this book is way ahead of its time when it states about Australian wines: 'where the acid levels of many French varieties are diminished, the Italian ones remain refreshingly tart'. This last aspect has grown hugely in importance in Australia recently, especially with many producers recognising that climate change and ever-higher temperatures forces a complete rethink and some radical changes. But Australia wouldn't be Australia if it hadn't taken on the challenge, which has led to several fascinating developments making Australia one of the most exciting wine countries currently in the world.

See [Italian grape varieties in Australia - part 2](#) for my report on these fascinating developments.