Grenache: THE DARK GRAPE RISES

Australian grenache is learning to dance, says **Daniel Honan**.

Bursting out from the old-vine vineyards of South Australia, where the land is brown and wide, the days are hot and dry, the wines are big and gutsy, and you can watch your dog run away from home for miles and miles in any direction. A sense of elegance, finesse and cool restraint is emerging out of goblet-shaped vines and into the glasses of wine lovers all across the world.

While pinot noir still languishes as nothing more than a mythical contender to Australian wine's real historical superhero — shiraz — grenache endures as the grape Australia needs, but not the one it deserves right now.

Hitherto, a faceless grape: anonymous, innominate — a dark knight that chews strawberry flavoured bubble gum. It was once a stalwart of stickies and fortified wines; a dependable blender that adds flashes of red fruit fragrance, power, richness and spice to any mysterious 'Dry Red Wine from Southeastern Australia'. Today, the dark grape rises out of obscurity, out of the shadows, out from under the unlimited ability of shiraz to grow pretty much anywhere it's planted.

Grenache makes shiraz look like a triffid. And even though Australia has indulged in over a century's worth of winegrowing with this variety, this stoic steward, this silent guardian of Australian wine, at last, grenache's time in the sun has come.

"The wine world has changed so much since my father and his colleagues were making wines in the Barossa Valley. Grenache is a part of that story," says Ruggabellus winemaker, Abel Gibson.

Grenache buds early, but ripens late, and seems well suited to the warmer wine growing regions of the world. Research into the origins of grenache

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posit Spain or Italy as the grape's likely homeground. Contested DNA profiling by both Spanish and Italian ampelographers place its origins as from either Aragón, in the northeast of Spain (where it is known as garnacha), or in Italy on the island of Sardinia (where it is called cannonau).

The French are responsible for the term grenache. It's the country's second most planted grape variety after merlot (94,240ha), where it thrives in the warm climes of the south, particularly the Rhône, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, the Languedoc-Roussillon and Taval, where grenache is used to produce some deliciously light, dry and refreshing rosés.

In Australia, sun-loving grenache has made an important home for itself in the warmer regions of South Australia, particularly the McLaren Vale and the Barossa Valley, but also further out in regions like Langhorne Creek and the Riverland (2010ha). You can also find a few examples of grenache growing in the Clare and Eden valleys, the Adelaide Hills, and Heathcote in Victoria.

In the early twentieth century, grenache was a cornerstone of South Australian fortified wines due to its ability to reach very high sugar levels in the berries. When left out to ripen, ferment and then fortify, such wines can be full of dark chocolate, stewed plums and raisin-scented aromas — a palate dense and rich (like spicy fruit cake), unctuous and powerful, although sometimes syrupy and cloying.

As the decades passed from the 1970s onwards, grenache fortified wine production fell from 52,000 tonnes in 1979 to 19,200 tonnes in the mid-90s, signifying a shift in Australian wine culture towards dryer styles of wine.

Why did grenache fall? So that we could learn to pick it back up.

"Grenache is going through some changes," says Abel Gibson. "The fruit used to be left to ripen to such high alcohols and either be blended away or made into some fairly non-descript red wines. The wines today are much brighter, fresher and more balanced."

Grenache's propensity to race towards high sugar levels causes the natural acids and colour to quickly drop out. Today's winemakers are bringing a sense of youthful wisdom to these old bush vines by picking at lower Brix, in order to express the grape's vitality and capture a sense of prettiness beneath the power.

"There's been a realisation that grenache can express a lot more individuality if it's picked a little earlier, with more natural acidity and freshness," says New Zealand-born winemaker Michael Corbett. Michael makes some incredibly delicate and sinewy examples of grenache under his Vanguardist wine label.

"If you pick grenache at, say, 15% Baumé (27˚ Brix) the wines become pretty big and dull — all super ripe and shrivelled black fruits, plums and raisins," Michael continues. "You don't see the individuality of the variety. But, if you pick much earlier, around 12% to 13% (21˚ to 23˚), grenache becomes a much prettier beast. The acids are brighter, the tannins are silkier and the flavours are juicy, fruity and floral."

"I'm aiming for suppleness, so if I see sultanas and plums I know I've picked too late," explains Abel Gibson. "I try to capture grenache somewhere in the watermelon and sour cherry zone, when the tannins are supple, just before it hits raspberry, strawberries and cream.

"Personally," he continues, "I'm fascinated by the space, succulence and aromatics that low alcohol grenache can achieve, without compromising complexity and ageability."

Down by the sea, just 30 minutes' drive southeast of Adelaide lies McLaren Vale. A place, which, according to the doyen of Australian wine, James Halliday, is one of the best places in Australia to grow grenache. Here, grenache constitutes some of the oldest grape vines in the world.

"I think McLaren Vale gives rise to a brightness and freshness that few regions can match," says Peter Fraser, winemaker at Yangarra Estate. "I was fortunate enough to start working with grenache from our estate in 1998, from vines that were planted in 1946," he continues. "The old vines always excite me, and it's just a variety I've always felt an affinity with."

Yangarra make a number of gorgeous wines from grenache, including an elegant onion-skinned rosé — a sublime, tense yet lithe wine — made from gnarled, 72-year-old dry-grown vines, and a wonderfully complex grenache Fraser named Ovitelli.

"Ovitelli are in these large-format ceramic eggs," explains Fraser. "The grenache can remain on skins for up to 160 days, depending on the season, so as to create a more elegant, fragrant expression of the grape. My desire is to find a fine balance between beauty, finesse and restraint, and a purity of aromas and flavours."

Beauty, finesse, power and purity. This is modern Australian grenache. And its ability to express site and seasonal variation of place and time only adds to this grape's ability to fascinate wine lovers all across the world.

Deep down, grenache may still be that same old wine it used to be. However, it's not what it once was — it's what winegrowers are doing with grenache today that defines it. It's the wine hero Australia needs and maybe New Zealand deserves. Australia's dark grape is rising.

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