

THE SEARCH FOR REGIONAL IDENTITY

The genesis for my love of regionalism and what it represents particularly in the wine industry is due to 2 prominent influencers, during my education and subsequent involvement in the industry as a practising winemaker.

The first was my discovery of a technical paper in 1978 by Mario Fregoni presented at the world wine technical conference in South Africa in 1977. The long title probably frightened most people away from reading it, but I was sufficiently young and foolish enough to soldier on. The title “ Effects of the Soil and Water on the Quality of the Harvest” easily summarized the subject matter, and the review of literature at that time by Professor Fregoni attempted to put into words the seasoned experience that many of the old world’s vineyards had known for decades even centuries. The influences of a region when it came to wine could be explained by many factors; that if followed could improve identity and recognition. Half way through my winemaking degree I was struggling with my own uncertainty about a career in the wine industry and also the intimidatory yet stimulating demands of Dr Richard Smart, our viticulture lecturer at that time. After reading and then understanding what Professor Fregoni wrote I suddenly wanted to be part of the industry.

The second major influence occurred in 1989 when on a 3 month European work holiday I travelled with a cheese fanatic on the hunt for experience and knowledge in the back blocks of France. We held 2 books at all times, The Michelin guide of course but also French Cheese by Patrick Rance. His work at the time and regional descriptions on the origin of regional cheese certainly backed the principle that regionalism was everything when it came to cheese. It was a big disappointment to travel late last year up to Roquefort and see what the locals had done to their industry after a gap of 20 years.

If you put the proposition that food and wine are the most accessible examples of regionalism then it is worth examining its context now not just for the benefit of a new kid on the block agricultural producer like Australia but also for a possible antidote to the monoculture and blandness associated with homogenization of food to a global market.

AUSTRALIAN REGIONAL IDENTITY

The forces that shaped wine in this country were always regional, since there was no historical precedent just a demand.

HISTORICAL ACCIDENTS

Gold mining was the catalyst for many of Australia's wine regions at about the early 1850's. Places such as Ballarat, Geelong, Rutherglen/Glenrowan in Victoria; Mudgee, Forbes Orange and Bathurst in NSW all had vineyards and wineries operating. Large populations of mainly male miners and the town's inhabitants drank alcohol and although these were mostly fortified types like Muscat and Port the culture, history and experience gained were instrumental in these regions still remaining in the wake of external influences that removed a lot of the wine industry. Interestingly the beer culture that also existed has been mostly lost and occasionally makes forays at the micro level, but not as a regional origin beverage.

The commencement of the Hunter Valley was a result of the originator of the Australian wine industry James Busby's brother in law. King was allocated land on the Hunter River and initialised the first vineyard in the early 1930's. Wines from the Hunter valley survive as true expressions of regionalism because the famous styles of Semillon and Chardonnay are of the delicate type, picked early; therefore low in pH and sugar, soft in acidity by nature of the soil and low yield, light in colour phenolics and consequently latent, and fairly uniform across the region. Almost any white wine made this way in the Hunter Valley whether being Traminer Semillon or Chardonnay ultimately develops a regional bouquet that is not too difficult to identify. Semillon because it is thin skinned and more prone to disease is made more delicate by earlier harvest and is a slower ageing example and therefore the regions hero variety. The regional character is accentuated by the maritime conditions and the influence of wet weather around harvest time necessitating harvest to be earlier rather than later.

The designated wine area Rutherglen has maintained its status as the home of the other regional classic Muscat or Topaque the new determined name for the sweet fortified style made from Muscat grapes. The region started because of Gold and has maintained its regional identity.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

In particular this relates to three areas, Barossa Valley in South Australia, Griffith in New South Wales and Australia's first wine region Swan Valley in Western Australia. The settlement of Silesian Germans in the Barossa, Italians in Griffith and Dalmatians in the Swan led to a communal wine culture that still exists today. Although not strictly following the country origin in wine style, cooperation, identity and other food cultures developed alongside so that today

heritage is as much a reason for its continuation as its original settlement reasons. The formation of legal geographical boundaries of these wine regions has in my view no effect on protecting the heritage merely giving an opportunity to exploit or alternatively to protect the name. The Barossa and Griffith have maintained strong cultural links to the original settlers and this identity is still backed by a wine producing culture. Wine was the catalyst for the region and is still the binding influence for its spread of culture into sympathetic businesses.

METEOROLOGY AND HOMOCCLIME

This last stage of Regionalism was brought about by the proposition that the vastness of the continent of Australia would somewhere house similar physical conditions that would be similar to European wine regions and that the planting and management of vineyards in the same way would yield wine replicas.

Practically that involved in a mapping sense inverting the map of Australia into the northern hemisphere then with the aid of charts of temperature, solar radiation, aspect, rainfall and soil type finding your favourite wine area. At Roseworthy as a student we were given a European wine region and asked to find its equivalent in Australia. It was a fascinating study. With altitude from the Great Dividing Range down the East coast of Australia we could close in on those wine areas in Europe with cool climate conditions by virtue of their northern latitude position.

New wine areas proliferated in the three main wine states, Adelaide Hills in South Australia, Beechworth, Mornington Peninsula, Drumborg in Victoria, and Orange, Tumbarumba, New England in NSW. In addition Tasmania became an exciting new prospect with the latitude to match Northern Europe, and Oregon USA, itself undertaking a renaissance in vineyard expansion.

It has taken arguably 30 years for these regions to realize the grape varieties most suited to the climate, with the difficulty of quality replication further complicated by an explosion in market opportunities and wildly changing consumer drinking habits.

EUROPEAN REGIONAL IDENTITY

In the Scottish historical book *Knee Deep in Claret* the author describes how the wine region of Medoc and Graves surpassed the quality of the favoured red wine region Bergerac and further east higher up the massive central. This goes back to Eleanour of Acqitaine marrying Henry Plantagenet and the annexing of the western 1/3 of France to England. As the French clawed

back their territory the port city of Bordeaux became increasingly important and so did those who owned or controlled the flow of goods from the Gironde out into the Atlantic and off to destinations North and South. The superior wine of the Bergerac area due to colour and alcohol lost its appeal over this period as the Burghers of Bordeaux used 2 methods to favour their own wine.

They installed a fixed tax based on each barrel; the 300 litre hogshead the Bordelaise favoured was at a lower cost per litre than the 225 litres from further east and up the hill at Bergerac.

Secondly the wine from the east could not be brought down to the port until all the wine from Bordeaux had been made and dispatched and consequently as the wine was sold straight after vintage and without the technical ability of holding wine as we do today the wine would miss the early winter dispatch and would be carried over until the next Spring, summer when the Northern markets could receive wine and by then the wine was more disagreeable.

Another regional story that is relevant is the wine region around La Reole called Cocomont in the Lot valley south and east of Bordeaux. I worked there on and off in the horribly wet years of 1992 to 1995. The essential regional character of the region was the 5 superior red varieties that were planted in Bordeaux Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc, Merlot, Malbec and Petit Verdot. In a continental, not maritime climate the best wines were dark, strong in varietal definition and of some concentration. However to obtain the status of the appellation Cocomont they had to be typical of the region and be distinctive from any other wine region. To qualify for the superior marketing and label status of Cocomont the wines were required to contain 20% Aborieou a red wine I never observed as being ripe, of any colour any flavor apart from the impairment associated with its attraction of botrytis at the slightest sign of humidity.

The control of the appellation of Cocomont was vested in the committee of winemakers that made up the association that determined the quality and marketing of Medoc and Graves in Bordeaux. For this committee it was vital that Aborieou maintained its lofty reputation in Cocomont not in Bordeaux. This would ensure that Bordeaux would never be under threat to Cocomont.

FORCES THAT WILL IMPACT ON REGIONS IN THE FUTURE

ENVIROMENTAL AND WEATHER

Just as we searched for distinctiveness 30 - 40 years ago with homoclimate the impact of climate change will alter a great deal in all wine regions. Not only temperature, water availability and sunlight have changed but so too have the meso climatic effects that management

manipulation would influence wine quality. Row direction of vineyard is now important, planting on the right soil type for uniformity not efficiency, slope for future frost problems from earlier budburst, soil drainage and rootstock selection for changes in salinity, all these will impact severely on today's vineyards.

Now much of Australia's vineyards are inappropriately placed or inappropriately planted. This of course is not just Australia's problem but also a global one. The explosion of plantings and the rush for vine stock 15 years ago has led to many vineyards now without the identity and quality necessary to ensure their retention.

Good sites that were planted with thought and flexibility will continue to deliver consistency and although changes will occur due to climatic factors vine and management capabilities will evolve at the same rate.

HEALTH

There is no getting away from the emerging debate about whether alcohol is a health drink or a hazard. Although not directly related to regionalism, wine areas that will be advantaged in the future will have the following capabilities.

Produce wines of flavor at lower alcohol levels.

Be flexible with wine styles and practice innovation.

Have strong associations and communal affiliations

Can demonstrate economic sustainability and social responsibility

URBAN CREEP

Increasing pressures from expansion of dwellings into vineyard areas to take advantage of a rural setting close to urban centres, will now give way to vineyard owners who need to exit the industry and see a way by subdivision to extract a good return or minimize losses with uneconomic vineyard future. Most wine areas in Australia will need to deal with this problem however if managed properly and if the vineyard is in a good site it can lead to better plantings, smaller scale niche marketing and can assist a community if the owners intend to operate the vineyard on quality principles. Large vineyards frequently fall short in quality due to management compromise, poor layout and stretch across unsuitable land in the attempt to plant as large an area as possible.

THE WAY FORWARD FOR REGIONS

The marketing of Australian wine here and overseas until now has been successful on a number of fronts.

Clear and precise labeling

Promotion of Variety

Advancement by ingenuity and resourcefulness

Minimal legislative restrictions

Advocacy by Producers

THE CONCEPT OF VALUE FOR MONEY

I contend that for us to regain some ground we need to tighten our message that we are adapting to the new challenges of increased competition, changes in climate and social responsibility.

Regional heroes have been a new focus by the wine and brandy corporation. The attempt is to identify and market those varieties that are benchmark for the region no matter what the circumstances. A great wine will default in time to its regional character. Of course it is entirely plausible that each region hasn't discovered the hero variety yet, as it is possible that the traditional classified regions of Europe may not have it right also.

So what is vital for a region is to establish a common thread that appears in all the wines. This might seem difficult to assess but what it tries to establish is what is common in a region. In the case of my region Mudgee it was discovered that the continental climate coupled with the red free draining soils delivered red wines with strong fixed acidity likened to soy sauce, yet with a thickness or texture that obscured the very high alcohols the wines inherently contained.

The changes that occur in the wine industry at this very moment are an excellent opportunity for changes in variety, vineyard management, and winemaking innovation to occur. To rely solely on a regional wine industry to provide economic benefits is made more difficult if development is done in isolation. A parallel agricultural industry along with wine makes better sense as it allows communal marketing, a solid story and can smooth out the seasonal vagaries that exist.

DISTINGUISHED SITES

With 64 current geographical registered sites in Australia the total regional message would confuse a whole lot of the world market. The process of promoting and protecting outstanding vineyard sites I believe will do a lot to generally help a region come to terms with its identity. Promoting the stars certainly has worked in other countries with more wine history than ours. Aspiring vineyards and or wineries could be enthused by and learn from their peers. The quality attached to the stars may not be singularly from some rock star winemaker but could equally and more likely be from a great site. There is no greater example than precedent.

As Professor Fregoni states in my favourite paper the best wines come from those vines that can see the water below. This is a reference not to vines having a sea view but to the necessity for vines to be well drained in other words the water to be away from the vines.

The essential argument about regional wines and its place in the future of the Australian wine industry is that there should be no barriers to the region, the people who live in it and what they produce and how they produce it. New pressures that I have outlined will advance the prospects of some regions and diminish others but as long as quality is focused the best wines will give the best regional message and provide opportunity for other players to be part of a wonderful industry.

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Tuesday, October 26, 2010