

ROB GEDDES
GOOD
DRINKING



you be the judge

WHEN MAE WEST SAID, “TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING can be wonderful,” she was not imagining wine show judging. Race car drivers and mountaineers get off easy. They get to do their jobs sober.

Over the October long weekend, I chaired the Australian Highlands Wine Show, working with Mount Majura winemaker and owner Dr Frank van der Loo, and Adam Walls, a wine buyer for Wine Selectors. Our associate judge was sommelier Ben Shepherd from Biota Dining.

Don't get me wrong. The Australian method of judging wine is logical and practical, and a sophisticated system with checks and balances. A tripod of judges balances winemakers with wine buyers and wine writers.

Working with associates, each wine is assessed, described and scored individually. Then judges share their views and give a final agreed score or award. It is original Australian 'group think' and as unique as the taste of our wines.

By awarding quality wines, the wine show method has been central to Australia's ongoing success. Through encouraging and distributing new ideas, identifying new quality regions and understanding new varieties, we have been able to rapidly improve the quality of our wines.

Still, it is an unlikely scenario. Can you imagine allowing the chief engineers and CEOs of Toyota, BMW and Ford to test drive each other's cars and report back to the board, before release? That's what happens in the Australian wine industry, when judges from competing businesses become a college of tasters in pursuit of quality.

Let me set the scene. Imagine your partner has left you in the company of friends with hundreds of open wine bottles for a day that you dare to call work. Yet it is hardly a party, as during the long day you must draw on reserves of concentration. You need to consistently taste and describe accurately, yet the very product you are sipping, swirling, tasting, noting and judging is silently creeping up on you.

As Ben from Biota says, “You need to give the first wine of the day as much concentration as the last.” The focus is to accurately rate all wines and identify elusive gold medal and trophy wines.

You also have professional pride and your reputation at stake. The judging team must choose wines that will stand scrutiny by less tired, equally talented judges in the future.

The most powerful judge of wine is time, but you have to focus on youthful, virtually microcosmic, taste distinctions that will broaden into more noticeable flavours or faults over time. Afterwards, sometimes years later, one of your peers will

appear with a bottle saying “You gave this a gold medal?” And remember, you volunteered for this job, along with all the staff on hand.

Taking small mouthfuls helps keep you fresh, by operating on the threshold of taste, not washing your mouth with each wine. Being fit also helps. Toned muscles burn sugar (aka alcohol) faster and help your liver and brain stay on top of the job.

Historically, the duty to taste responsibly has varied. A wine writer in Victoria, and the odd Barossa winemaker, have become folk heroes from the '80s as “dry buckets”, never spitting a drop of their tiny sips and remaining coherent at the end of the day. Those days have passed, and today's judges seem much quieter. The first thing most judges swallow is a beer at the end of the tasting day.

Perhaps modern earnestness is a response to sustained ego bruising when your cherished top wine is rebuked, even if gently, by fellow judges. Still, at this show a hundred wines were tasted, and only a few egos were damaged in the process. The outcome creates new winners and grinners.

And then comes the judge's dinner, where wine is actually swallowed. Stories are told, great wines tasted, and winning wines from other shows are shared, discussed and drunk with food. This is the best part of judging, when wine flows and industry conversation is shared between organisers, associates and volunteers.

The Australian Highlands Wine Show was organised by the Southern Highlands Food and Wine Association and held at Eling Forest. **HL**

And the winners are. . .

The Australian Highlands Wine Show is open to any Australian wine originating from grapes grown at an altitude of 500 metres or above. This year more than 120 wines entered and 69 medals were presented.

Trophy winners from the Southern Highlands were Tertini 2015 Pinot Gris, Centennial 2015 Old Block Riesling 1012, Centennial 2015 Gewurztraminer House Block and Centennial 2014 Reserve Pinot Noir.

Other trophy winners were Stockman's Ridge 2014 Rider Shiraz and Cumulus Wines 2014 Chardonnay, both from Orange.

top drops



Cuttaway Hill NV Laurence Sparkling Chardonnay Pinot Noir (\$35, 92/100)

A very complete wine for Christmas. Funky, yeasty aromas of marzipan and bready complexity with pear and apple fruit. Lovely line of acid in the light medium body with long chardonnay fruit and a funky yeast verging into mushroom flavours. The finish has length, balance and a lemon acidity.



Karrawatta 2013 Christo's Paddock Cabernet Sauvignon (\$54, 96/100)

Classic Langhorne Creek regional aromas with cabernet bay leaf and earthy mirepoix. In the mouth a fleshy fruit wine with round, plush tannins. It is soft textured with subtle ripe fruit, and the bay leaf adds complexity to the olive and blackcurrant fruit. Very impressive; a cabernet for shiraz drinkers.



Windowrie 2015 The Mill Sauvignon Blanc (\$18, 95/100)

Cracking varietal aromas with grapefruits and herbaceous perfumes. The palate has texture from a touch of dry, grippy skins that add weight to the forward fruits with a good length and mix of guava and tropical fruits.



Cloudburst 2014 Chardonnay (\$250, 95/100)

Appealing malt and shortbread citrus elements add to aromas from wild yeast. The palate shows Vegemite, refined and distinguished by citrus and stone fruit complexity. A floral top note is added to the fruits and tannins. The mouth feel is firm textured, with almost pear skin type pithy tannins.



De Iuliis 2013 Limited Release Shiraz (\$60, 95/100)

Hunter savoury fruit aromas of dark spice, black berry and dark plum. This is a classic; smooth textured, and generous with silky tannins. A polished, medium-bodied, sweet-fruited wine with spiced plum, savoury fruits and good length. Lively, textural and nuanced, like a good book that keeps you wondering what comes next.



Meerea Park 2010 Alexander Munro Semillon (\$40, 95/100)

Vineyard sooty aroma elements of subtle acid are lifted by beeswax and lemon. In the mouth the palate is mature, round and fresh. Fully mature tertiary flavours and released at the ideal time for a mature wine. Lemon, guava, and subtle complex funky notes.

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