



the grape survivor

VINES IN VALENCIA PROVINCE, SPAIN

THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW A GREAT GRAPE FROM THE backblocks of Spain ended up with three names (all beginning with M), was nearly extinguished by disease, and was then reborn and redeemed in new lands as a 21st century wine hero. Geography, humanity and history conspired to hold back our recognition of monastrell as they say in Spain, mataro as we call it here, or mourvedre for the French, as one of the great grapes of the planet.

Monastrell was Spain's original *vino de la tierra* and its most widely planted red variety until it was taken over by grenache and tempranillo in the late 19th century. *La tierra* is a lovely word, much more evocative than the English 'land'. It's an indicator of this earthy, nuggety wine with its ripe blackberry, dried herbs flavours, wrapped in manly luscious silky tannins, that reduce food to a supporting role in the meal.

South Australian winemaker Stephen Henschke, who makes the delicious Johann's Garden Mataro, first fired my interest when he explained how monastrell was thought to have got its name. It was first grown in monasteries on the walls, where extra heat leads to super-ripe grapes and wines with rich flavours. Monasteries were the four star hotels of antiquity, providing safe haven and sustenance for travellers. The monks needed wine for everyday guests and good wine for important guests.

The English and the French called the wine mataro or mourvedre after the Spanish ports where monastrell departed. The names stuck, in keeping with the wine industry tradition of naming wines by their origins, such as the port of Bordeaux, which covers multiple villages and varieties.

Throughout the 1800s, the wine was seen as a 'modern' alternative to other wines; it was dark in colour and strong in alcohol amid seas of rosé, and ideal for making up for the deficiencies of the lighter French reds. Prior to the late 19th century phylloxera devastation, mourvedre was widely planted in southern France and shines today as the dominant variety in Bandol's famous rosés.

There was always a big trade from Spain, which reached a flood with the arrival of phylloxera in France in the 1880s. Failing French vineyards increased demand. Then phylloxera

arrived in Spain and destroyed their vineyards, nearly driving monastrell/mourvedre to extinction.

Unfortunately the variety was hard to graft, cropped badly and nurserymen found the unreliability unprofitable. How could they sell vines that did not work? This is when tempranillo increased in Spain.

Replanting did not begin seriously until after World War II, when sufficient vine stock was developed that was adapted to grafting and produced consistent crops. Of course South Australia, a veritable Noah's ark of varieties, escaped phylloxera and the old mataro vines toiled on.

Monastrell suits the east coast of Spain and is especially happy growing inland with heat, drought and altitude. It thrives in the appellations that cluster on Spain's south-eastern Mediterranean coast: Almansa, Valencia, Alicante, Jumilla and Yecla.

In Australia, you'll find mataro in South Australia, where it is a late ripening variety that can withstand heat thanks, in part, to its small, round, thick-skinned berries and natural high acidities. The black-blue bunches are extremely loose knit and gangly and look like a version of cabernet sauvignon or southern Italian red varieties. The grapes have a natural drought resistance and are often harvested in excellent condition in very hot vintages.

Mataro wine is dark in colour, smells of dark berries, Provencal herbs and spices, and has plenty of tannin texture and length, with a savoury smoked meats or charcuterie finish. The Hewitson Old Garden Mourvedre is my current benchmark with the 2012 edition taking varietal flavours to a new level. It hails from an 1853 South Australian vineyard believed to be the oldest mataro vineyard in the world.

The qualities of mataro have helped create one of Australia's strongest red wine categories since the mid 1990s, commonly known as GSM. Mataro works in a grenache/shiraz/mataro blend because even when it is hidden at the back of the room in terms of small percentage, its tannins and flavours make a powerful contribution.

We will see more mataro in years to come. It is tough, it suits the current weather patterns, and once you try a good one you will never forget it, whatever the name. **HL**

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top drops



Fitzroy Lake Southern Highlands Chambourcin 2014 (\$35, 92/100)

For several vintages, quite the best dry red from this variety that I have ever seen. The medium bodied palate has very good energy and drive with long flavours of red cherry fruits and a rhubarb-like snappy acidity. It was awarded Highly Commended in the 2015 International Wine Challenge in London.



Caillard Mataro 2013 (\$50, 90/100)

Another dark, brooding mataro from Master of Wine and deep thinker Andrew Caillard. Cocoa oak aromas with dusty dark plum fruits are woven in a tense dialogue. The fruit is latent, the palate long, silky and textured, and fine-grained tannins finish off the wash of black fruits. Very firm and young.



Hewitson Old Garden 2012 Mourvedre (\$88, 95/100)

Youthful restraint with date, prune and earthy black fruits and gentle pepper spice on the nose. Initial youthful dark berry fruits wed to classic firm tannins fill the mouth, flowing to a long finish with dried dark spices. It has the balance and intensity for a long life in the cellar.



Rosemount GSM McLaren Vale 2013 (\$39.99, 96/100)

This grenache/syrah/mataro blend boasts a seamless unravelling of raspberry grenache, smoky dark blackberry and a savoury meaty back note in fresh, moderate oak. In the mouth it has red fruits and dark plum in a charge of flavours. The unfolding tannin textures are full, silky, even and long. Joyous drinking.



Domaine La Suffrene Bandol Rosé (\$31, 94/100)

Bandol in Provence is the home of pale, dry rosé. This one features mourvedre, cinsault and grenache and has a classic pale salmon colour. Aromas are pomegranate, cranberry, redcurrant and strawberry, while in the mouth it has generous red fruits and a long finish.



Enrique Mendoza La Tremenda 2011 Monastrell (\$31, 94/100)

Cherry, raspberry, kelp, cedar, tobacco and oregano aromas. Medium bodied, the flavours are multi stage with stewed dark fruits, a hint of meaty complexity, then bay leaf spice lingering on the finish. The tannins are silky up front and turn firmer as red fruits turn to spice. Perfect with a huge steak.

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