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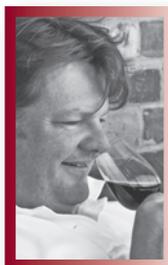
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The magic of old wine



MICHAEL GLOVER
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PRESSING ISSUES

The year of my birth was 1968. I grew up with '68 Grange, '68 Wynn's Cabernet Sauvignon, '68 Chateau Reynella Cabernet Sauvignon and of course, '68 Chateau Reynella Vintage Port to name a few. All of these wines were purchased by my father on release with the sole purpose of sharing them with me sometime in the future. He started opening them for me when I was about 15 and continued until the last Grange was consumed on my 30th birthday. I remember this bottle for a number of reasons. First, the fact that a guest sitting on a couch managed to drop the bottle from knee height to a hard slate floor... it bounced and was caught before descending to the floor for a second attempt at destruction. I am sure they don't make glass like that anymore.

More importantly, it was the sense of occasion that I remember so vividly – the fact that it was an occasion and therefore, as far as my father was concerned, deserving of an 'occasion' wine (my father firmly believes that a winemaker must have a "sense of occasion"). His last bottle of an original dozen 1968 Penfolds Grange Hermitage emerged from the cellar. Dust covered the bottle and the label. The wine had been purchased somewhere back in Whitlam times and had been cellared underneath various houses in Canberra until travelling with the family across the Tasman Sea to Upper Moutere in New Zealand, where Mum and Dad had put their own vines into the ground. This was the last bottle... there were no more in the case. Yes, you could buy another at auction but that would simply be a monetary transaction, a mere passing of funds to acquire a possession. What price do you place on the cobwebs and dust of personal cellaring? What value do you put on the

gesture of someone opening the last bottle they have cellared 30 years just for you? The gesture is everything.

And how did the wine perform? In a room full of winemakers it simply stopped the traffic. There was complete silence. Words did not seem adequate... one chap came close by uttering a four-letter expletive under his breath. No tasting notes were compared, no scores given; just a hushed thank you and a feeling of awe for the wine. It confirmed to me that great wine is old wine and, like a great soprano, performs at its best on the great occasions.

I find it terribly sad when I talk to wine people and they casually dismiss old wine. I suspect these people not only lack the sense of occasion that is required, but also an understanding and appreciation of what old wine is about. One does not even have to leave Australian shores to conclude that ageability is an essential prerequisite to greatness. Max Schubert, Maurice O'Shea and Karl Stockhausen are names that are associated with truly great Australian wines. The example set by some of their wines still stand as guiding beacons in this country, to point the way to what can be achieved with the right bit of dirt and an eye to the 'mountain top'. In my opinion, a winemaker's greatest achievement is to be associated with a wine that is still held in awe long after your own demise. I guess it is the closest a winemaker can come to immortality and is perhaps the kindest gift a great vineyard can confer upon a custodial winemaker.

Great old wine is wine at its most romantic, its most subjective, its most artistic and in a sense its most pure and noble. Old wine is the antithesis to wine being a 'beverage', a 'unit' and 'just a drink'. This is not the realm of the 'on-scene' wine punk who is seen at all the right 'gigs' and prattles off his scores to an equally dull boffin who isn't listening anyway. No! Old wine is a much more private, perhaps spiritual affair that demands reverence and ritual. The decanter and the long-stemmed glassware are not just desirable, they are essential. Forget about sharing, this is about listening to what the wine has to say not the person sitting next to you.

Once again I defer to my father who long ago coined the 'volume rule'. His rule states that a great 750mL bottle is to be shared with a maximum of four people! Having eight to dinner? Bring on the magnum! This rule allows for the multiple pour which is essential for old wine.

Like an old man, an old wine must be allowed some time to collect his thoughts and clear the foggy memory. How often are we mystified and intrigued by the wine that evolves, grows and blossoms in the glass, and what a far cry it is from those young trophy-winning wines, newly released and decorated with medals from hollow victories. How many of those wines actually have something meaningful to say? How often do you return for the second glass only to find the previously attractive young thing is now akin to an airbrushed, silicon-enhanced caricature?

Great old wine is a much-needed reality check. It has the ability to eliminate the 'business of wine' and return us from our 'expert', 'all-knowing' status to eager, enthusiastic amateurs, full of enquiry and wonder.

Age is what wine is really all about. The deed has been done, the bank perhaps foreclosed, the opinions, points and scores from critics now just recycled paper, the fashion and trend now out-of-vogue and obsolete, the winemaker perhaps dead; all that remains is the vineyard, the wine and the test of time. What wisdoms and revelations does it possess? And can you understand them?

Within the marvels of a great old wine lie truths that have existed through centuries of winemaking. The truths of great sites, mature vineyards and low yields. There also exists a kind of 'spirit', a lasting smile from a ghostly winemaker who received great fruit and knew what to do with it.

With great artistic licence I will retire with Shakespeare:

*"Come, brother, let us to the highest of the field,
To see what friends are living, who are dead.
I'll follow, as they say, for reward.
He that rewards me, God reward him!"* Henry IV Part One

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Call for Technical Papers.

Provisor's workshop is dedicated to the presentation of submitted papers as part of the Australian Wine Industry Technical Conference in Adelaide, in July 2007. The forum will be devoted to topics related to benchmarking studies, process efficiency audits, processing technology improvements, new products, process R&D and improvements to operating methodology.

This is a call for Papers comprising:

- an evaluation of published literature and current technology, or
- a summary of new developments or investigation outcomes consistent with the workshop theme.

Papers must not endorse a specific company or product. All presentations will be reviewed by an independent panel prior to acceptance.

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Deadline for abstract: 15 February 2007

Deadline for paper if accepted: 25 May 2007

For further information or submission guidelines, please contact Dr Vincent O'Brien of Provisor on (08) 8303 8700 or refer to Provisor's website at www.provisor.com.au or contact enquiries@provisor.com.au

