

# Riesling in the Clare Valley

## History Bits 'n' Pieces

The Clare Valley was originally settled by an Englishman named Horrocks (who died after being shot in the face by his own camel). Historically, this was an area for stone fruit and moved over to vines in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly for the production of communion wine for the southern hemisphere.

After World War II, Clare started to sell Crouchen and took over from McLaren as the leading source of Riesling (once Mick Knappstein planted the "real thing" in the 1950s at Leasingham). The style then was austere and flinty, with alcohol levels at about 10.5-11%. In the 1980s, Croser developed a dry Spatlese style, with alcohol raised to around 12 – 12.5%. Riesling has struggled all over the world, including Australia in the past 10-20 years, but today Clare is at the forefront of a resurgence in premium Riesling. This was, therefore, the natural focus for the seminar and visits in Clare. It was certainly notable that all the wine makers drive new 100,000 Aussie dollar cars (Mercs, BMWs and Andrew Hardy's terrifying Evo 4) so something must be going their way.

## Geography and all that

The climate is Mediterranean, with red and chocolate brown loam over broken limestone, giving good water holding capacity. However water availability is a significant problem with rainfall typically 28 inches (700 mm) and some producers piping water over 10km. This will limit any further vineyard development (there is no urban conurbation nearby, so recycling grey water as in McLaren Vale is not possible).

Clare is by no means a cool area, with peak temperatures hitting 40°C, though even on such hot days, it is rare to get a night over 15°C. During the very hottest spells, the vines tend to shut down and avoid heat stress, whereas cooler windier days can be more damaging as the stomata remain open.

In the vineyard, there is great interest in water management for stressing the vines, though not to the point of leaf loss. Several producers are also trialling VSP (vertical shoot positioning) including Stephanie O'Toole. She has a vineyard which was half traditional canopy and half VSP, with such good results for the latter last year; she is retraining the whole plot. Most of the Riesling in Clare is over 30 years old, but Petaluma's plantings from 1995 are VSP and already produce some of their best fruit. From an economic viewpoint, VSP has an advantage in being significantly cheaper to pick and is easily mechanised (prices were quoted of 150 AUD (or Aussie dollars) per tonne for mechanical picking, compared to 400 AUD for traditional). However, most top producers are handpicking all their Riesling anyway.

## Technical Stuff

Riesling accounts for approximately 25% of Clare production, but is the valley's strongest claim to producing wines that have a unique style and clear distinction from other regions. Clare Riesling is dry (under 5g/l residual sugar) with consistent mineral notes and "lemon and lime" fruit characters which evolve into "toast and honey" with age (petrol and kerosene are seen as faults). Producers expect an ageing potential of around 20 years in most vintages. The residual sugar levels are kept low, partly due to fruit ripeness, but also as a stylistic choice

to produce wines for food. The consumer also appears to identify with Care because of the consistency of style.

Most producers do acidify in warmer years and adjust immediately after crushing or pressing. The most ethereal, delicate Rieslings are produced by hand picking and crushing, rather than whole bunch pressing. This allows better separation of the heart juice from the pressing and is the approach preferred by Grosset and Hardy at Knapppstein. Hardy aims to go from picking to juice within one hour, followed by cold settling with enzymes, and he may also hold chilled juice to ferment later. All the winemakers seem to take a reductive approach to winemaking and use sulphur dioxide early to avoid extraction of phenolics.

### The Grubby Hand of Commerce

Producers and retailers of Riesling are very interested to know what Clare is doing right in marketing, pricing and promotions as most producers here are reporting selling out within a few months of the vintage. Commercially, Clare Riesling appears to offer the consumer a very good deal, with most wines selling at retail in Australia for less than 20 AUD. Grosset wines are the exception, but even here release prices are 35 AUD, though his wines now reach 110 AUD at auction. These are still reasonable prices compared to other top whites, and as Andrew Hardy commented, "these are world class wines for very moderate prices".

Cost prices have come under some pressure as grape prices have risen considerably in the last decade (from just 500 AUD per tonne to between 1100 and 1600 per tonne depending on quality), though this still seems moderate compared to Shiraz at up to 3000 AUD per tonne.

Another significant move by Clare producers has been bottling under Stelvin screw cap closures. This has received much press coverage elsewhere, but a few key points emerged from the debate. The producers feel strongly that this is a quality issue as the new closures are more expensive. There has been strong support on this angle from the press and sommeliers who gain by having an extra story to tell to their customers. Dissenters include Tim Adams who is concerned that widespread use of screw caps will prevent the development of the classic Clare style of "honey and toast". Jeff Grosset, in contrast, believes that this will still evolve, but may take longer. To date there have been few long term comparisons of parallel bottlings, but Mitchell's did bottle their 1977 vintage under both cork and screw cap. They reported that for 10 years both closures showed virtually identical development, but after that Stelvin bottlings continued to develop, while cork sealed bottles faded.

### Evidence in the Glass

The day's tastings were in 3 parts. First, there was a flight of 2000 Rieslings, then a range of older wines ranging from 1999 back to 1982. Finally, a panel of MWs presented a selection of international Rieslings. After this the group split up for individual producer visits.

The 2000 Rieslings clearly demonstrated that there is a fair degree of consistency in the Clare style, with descriptors like mineral, citrus, lemons and peach occurring frequently. In my view, the quality was very high but wines that showed particularly well included Grosset Polish Hill and Watervale, Knapppstein Handpicked, Mount Horrocks Watervale and Tim Adams. The older wines did support the claim that Clare Riesling is one of only two Australian whites with a proven ability to age (the other being Hunter Semillon) and demonstrating "toast and honey" characters rather than kerosene. Stars in this flight included Grosset

Polish Hill 1992, Tim Knappstein 1986 and Petaluma 1982. The international Rieslings were generally admired (with a couple of exceptions) but were perhaps not felt to be particularly relevant to what Clare is trying to achieve.

### The Future

The future looks fairly rosy for Clare Riesling, and the united and consistent approach taken by the producers (at least in public) is major strength. Challenges certainly do lie ahead – the wines are only ever likely to appeal to a knowledgeable niche market and prices have probably reached their ceiling. Nevertheless, Clare Riesling puts a strong case for its claim to be one of the world's most distinctive wine styles.