

New Kids on the Block

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The World of Wine is not too dissimilar to humans. Good and bad years come and go, the place is full of different races and creeds (or in wines case, varieties). There is the occasional epidemic that wipes many of us out (i.e. Phylloxera), but then there are the constant re-births. The birth of children is always a special time and we are currently witnessing the emergence of a new wine 'family' in Australia, bred by our own CSIRO. The team at Merbein in Victoria have brought together parents cabernet sauvignon and sumoll and are pleased to announce the arrival of four offspring.

What is sumoll? You may well ask. Well, it is a little-known low pH red grape variety from the equally, little-known region, of Alella in Spain. One of the smallest DO regions, it is located immediately north of Barcelona in the larger region of Cataluña. The predominantly white wine region, which dates back to the Roman era, has hot summers and mild winters and is described as fully Mediterranean. Sumoll, therefore was considered ideal for Australia's climate.

Similar to we humans, when you cross two grape varieties, you are unlikely to get the same result twice and although the parents are the same, the four new varieties are all different. "Breeding is very adventurous," comments Russell Johnston, National Technical Services Manager for Orlando, "You never know what you are going to end up with"

Naming the children is always a difficult task, especially so with new grape varieties. They needed something that said 'red' and then they had to ensure that no tricky operator in any far-flung corner of the wine world had copyrighted the name. After, I would imagine, much scratching of collective chins, the children were named; Tyrian, Cienna, Vermilion and Rubienne. The names are all a variance of the colour red.

Although the launch of these grape varieties was in February 2000, the actual cross breeding of cabernet sauvignon with sumoll was made as early as 1973. Peter Clingeleffer, leader of the CSIRO breeding team, takes up the story. "The specific objectives of the wine grape breeding program was to develop varieties suited to Australian environments, particularly selections with improved pH, organic acid composition, colour (in red varieties) and flavour composition". "The selections were originally bred and selected by Dr Alan Antcliff". "Most of the initial evaluation was undertaken by George Kerridge, with Dr Antcliff and since the early 1980s with myself". In 1987 sites were established at Avoca in Victoria and Coonawarra in South Australia, to broaden the evaluation under different environments. Larger commercial plots were established across a range of environments with commercial wineries in the mid 1990s. "Hence, one could say, the overall process has taken nearly 30 years up to last year, when we were granted plant breeders right in January 2000" Peter adds.

Interaction with the wine industry began in earnest in 1995 when Orlando, Yalumba, Brown Brothers and McWilliams took adoption of their offspring. Orlando planted

rubienne, Yalumba and Brown Brothers cienna and McWilliam's choose tyrian. Vermilion was left in the CSIRO nursery. "Vermilion requires considerable more research and evaluation and we have dispensed with the use of the name," comments Peter.

The other three varieties are doing well. Tyrian is the first one to make it to a national release through McWilliam's Wines. McWilliam's are onto their second vintage, the first selling out in just four weeks. Only 500 cases were produced from their 10 tonne of fruit but on the back of their success the company has planted another 50 acres in the Riverland, with the first crop due in 2002. "We have other small trial plantings at our Barwang vineyard at Young and in the Hunter Valley" comments Production Director Doug McWilliam. The Hunter Valley could be a promising site for tyrian as grape bunches are loose which allows better airflow and less opportunity for rot to develop. Like their cabernet parent the tyrian is a late ripener, producing a full-bodied wine with good tannin structure and an intense deep colour. The berries and bunches are slightly larger than cabernet. Whilst not a big fruity style of wine tyrian may compensate by having a reasonable cellaring potential. The vine is quite vigorous and yields the same as shiraz. It is easy to mechanically harvest and prune, essential I'd imagine for its Riverina location.

McWilliam's fermented half the must in stainless steel and half in American oak, then blend the two components together. "Our 2000 is a real ripper" says a delighted Doug. They have decided to test the water in the show circuit with this latest release and are awaiting a few results before releasing the wine. The current vintage has collected a gold and a bronze medal to date. The sad news again, is that there will only be 500 cases of the 2000 vintage. Tyrian is part of their 'Regional Collection' series where they showcase best varieties from the best regions. For example cabernet from Coonawarra and tyrian represents the Riverina district. Recommended retail price remains a reasonable \$15.00.

Determined to get the best out of their variety Yalumba planted cienna on terra rossa soil at Wrattontully near Coonawarra in South Australia. They are into their third vintage and are extremely excited about the results. "It's a pretty strong wine with a high colour pigment and reasonably high acid retention" comments their Chief Viticulturalist Robin Nettbeck. "Cienna receives the full treatment in the winery with time on skins and French oak" he adds. It can have a tendency towards herbaceousness if not kept in check and seems to prefer warmer rather than cooler sites.

This assessment is reinforced by Peter Clingeffer. "In our studies, cienna tends to be the lowest yielding and earliest ripening of the four varieties." "It develops intense deep red-purple colour, rich berry fragrances with some herbaceous fruit character" The first release of cienna is planned at cellar door within six to twelve months. Its future seems bright as a niche market wine.

Brown Brothers have also trailed cienna and released their first vintage last year. Initially planted in their Bankside vineyard in the winter of 1998, Brown Brothers are not convinced it is the best location for the variety being a little bit cool and they are investigating warmer sites. "We decided to leave some residual sugar, a touch of CO2 and no oak influence in the final wine which sold well through our cellar door"

As with Yalumba they are impressed with cienna's colour and will probably exploit its tannin potential in future vintages. As a company they are quite use to experimenting with unusual grapes. Tarrango was another CSIRO development .It is a cross breed of touriga, a Portuguese variety, and sultana. Another late ripener, it produces a light red table wine.

Orlando-Wyndham planted small parcels of rubienne at Ramco in the Riverland region of South Australia. "We found the variety needs heat to perform," comments Russell Johnston. They have pulled two harvests from the vines so far but it is too early to assess its real potential. One role in the short term could be as a blending partner. They hope, that in the long term, rubienne will out perform other red grape varieties that are currently used in the Murray-Darling Basin, such as ruby, cabernet and grenache. Orlando has taken a different tack and have no plans in releasing rubienne as a niche market, single variety. "Trying to launch rubienne as a major blend is just not commercially viable" adds Russell.

Crossing grape varieties increases the choice available to consumers, and is one way a producers can match a variety to a specific regional climate. As most of the stakeholders in this project would agree, it is still very early stages and takes another 20 plus years to come to terms with a new variety. A number of the viticulturalist compared the way in which chardonnay has developed in Australia, as an example of the continual fine-tuning that will take place, with the likes of tyrian, rubienne and cienna.