

The Low-Down On Funk

This is an exciting time for Aussie wine. Winemakers are sometimes throwing away the rulebook in the search for Australia's new wine identity. There is a movement towards creating wines of elegance that express their regionality, with winemakers taking their cues from Europe. Our most adventurous vigneron are prepared to get down to their funky selves and make wines that not only excite, but challenge the status quo and jump head-first into truly edgy territory.

These winemakers practice the art of minimal intervention, with some stretching to the recycled fashion of 'natural wine'. Minimal interventionists are about letting the vineyard do the talking and then allowing the wine to run its course through fermentation and maturation without too much interference. They all allow indigenous yeasts to do their thing, and are not afraid of a little sulphide influence or letting their wines go right up the reductive edge to add layers of intrigue and funk. The results are wines that are unconventional and exciting.

However, the acceptance of these wines poses a conundrum not only with consumers, but also people within the wine industry itself. Some descriptors for these funky characters are 'struck match', 'savouriness', 'stinky' and 'earthiness'. Terms like savouriness and earthiness have also been used to describe the most evil of microbial taints, Brettanomyces (Brett), but the difference is that Brett tends to produce a drying, metallic and short palate, whereas wines with the right amount of good funk still have fruit weight, balance and length.



Accepting these characteristics as part of Australian wine brings in a whole new challenge. It could be argued that most Australian wine has become formulaic and devoid of personality, but the fact remains that most consumers and wine professionals alike expect our wines to be squeaky clean, fresh and above all fruity. Therefore the use of 'artefact' as winemakers call it, can chuck a curve ball to most wine consumers.

So, what is artefact? In simple terms, it is something non-grape that is 'added' to the wine. Oak is probably the most common form of artefact, along with cultured yeasts. Both can add aromatics to a wine, and also change mouthfeel and texture.

The 'natural' forms of artefact are wild yeasts, solids (the broken-down skins and pulp of the grapes) and whole-bunches in the ferments.

These can add to the aromatics and texture of the wine, and can also be pushed too far. That applies especially to whole-bunch fermentation. When this happens, the wine can taste green or have an unpleasant, coarse mouthfeel, particularly if there is insufficient supporting fruit weight.

Some varieties cope better with artefact than others, and produce wines of various styles and complexity. Chardonnay is a good example of a variety that handles manipulation. If we think about the expressions of chardonnay from Burgundy we begin to see its diversity. They range from steely, linear wines through to the more worked style of chardonnay we all know and many still love. In between, you will find every variation you could ever imagine and this is where it gets thrilling. On the other hand, this is not an exercise in seeing how French we can make our wines taste. It's a bit like doing a cover version of a song. We can take the basic premise, but do it in our own style.

Shiraz and pinot noir also cope well, particularly with whole-bunch fermentation. If done appropriately, whole bunches can add structure, perfume and complexity to wines. But it can turn quite ugly if the use of bunches and stems is not adjusted according to the vintage. For example, 2011 saw many green and coarse wines due to a lack of fruit concentration. In that instance, it could be argued that winemakers would have been better off destemming all fruit.

When it comes to a question of how much funk is too much, many winemakers believe it oversteps the line when the wines are overworked with oak or solids, or sulphides mask and/or strip the fruit. Some believe funk is terroir-driven in the first place, for example by natural yeasts. The simplest explanation seems to be that funk has gone too far when the fruit ceases to be the focus of the wine - when varietal definition and regionality are "artifacted" into submission.

At present the Australian wine industry is feeling a little insecure and uncertain, so perhaps a return to centre is required. Maybe we will rediscover our regionality and open our minds to where our funky wine styles can take us. Perhaps that holds the key to the new Australian wine identity we are seeking.

Deb Pearce

TWO NOT-SO-FUNKY REDS

2012 Gilligan McLaren Vale Shiraz Mourvèdre Grenache
Mulberries abound in this rich but approachable red blend which stops just short of being jammy. Good short term drinking.
(\$25.00) *Recommended*

2012 John Duval Wines Eligo GSM A delightful seamless red that is packed with multi-berry flavour and ready to enjoy.
(\$40.00) *Highly Recommended*

Lester Jesberg