

The full bottle on FIANO

Much of Italy, unsurprisingly, experiences Mediterranean climatic conditions – warm, dry summers and cool, wet winters. Grapes that thrive in such an environment are obviously suited to many parts of Australia, but it took generations of viticulture before Australians turned to the south of Italy for inspiration.



We seem to have settled on fiano. If we took the writings of esteemed English wine scribe Cyril Ray, fifty years ago, as gospel, fiano would not be here.

Cyril, in his 1966 book “The Wines of Italy” described fiano thus:

“ A light, frequently frizzante white wine, made from the grape of the same name, near Avellino. There is also a pleasing Fiano Spumante, and a sweeter, non-sparkling version, for dessert drinking. Production is said to be declining.”

Decline it did. That’s easy to comprehend. The mean July temperature on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius is about 24 degrees, much warmer than the mean January temperature in McLaren Vale (21.0) and the Hunter Valley (22.5). The combination of temperature and rudimentary wine making surely gave rise to coarse, oily white wines.

Two timely happenings saved fiano from extinction.

1. It was rescued by the Mastroberardino family who played a major role in preserving fiano as well as other ancient varieties of Campania.
2. Winemakers began to use stainless steel and refrigeration in producing white wines in southern Italy.

Fiano was worth saving. Jancis Robinson reports that some historians believe that fiano may have been the grape that produced Apianum, a prized wine of the ancient Romans, from the Vesuvian foothills.

Twenty-first century winemaking has allowed the flavours of the vineyard to be transferred to the bottle, and another face of fiano was revealed. That face has proved very attractive to a growing number of Australian wine producers.

We asked Mark Messenger (Juniper Estate, Margaret River) and Corrina Wright (Oliver's Taranga, McLaren Vale) about their experiences with fiano.

What is it like to work with?

“Growing wise, it’s heat and drought tolerant, with a similar ripening time to shiraz in McLaren Vale. It can be susceptible to wind damage on shoots early in the season. It grows big long canes, plenty of canopy and can tend to have a second crop at the ends of canes late in season. We have also had some ‘hen and chicken’. The grapes have super-high natural acidity, thick skins, and are small and ovoid. The juice is fluorescent green. It doesn't tend to sunburn and seems to be better in warmer climates. Crop control isn't needed.”

Corrina Wright (CW)

“Ours is grafted to sauvignon blanc roots.

Fiano has an open bunch structure, so even in a wet year like 2017 it resisted bunch rot well, although it seems susceptible to powdery mildew.

It’s relatively thick-skinned but juice yield is good, and it has high natural acidity. It’s a reasonable cropper without being excessive (9 to 10 t/ha) and a second crop as reported by some hasn't been an issue for us.”

Mark Messenger (MM)

Do you have any descriptors for the aroma and flavour of the juice and wine?

“Fresh crunchy acidity, textural, citrus, melon, yellow peach, pear, floral, hazelnut, mineral.” **MM**

“Ginger beer, basil pesto, kaffir lime. There’s a great textural note to the wines - cashew nut or pine nut, a beery element as well. It’s one of the best-suited varieties to our region that I know. It can be tropical or grassy in cooler climates which can give the wine a sauvignon blanc type character that I don’t rate as much.” **CW**

Are phenolics an issue?

“Not to me. I work with them and want to have some influence of phenolics in the wines. I machine or hand pick (depends on the block), hold cold on skins, basket press, 100% pressings back in, ferment on full solids. Natural ferment, lees stirring. The best wines have a textural element to them.” **CW**

“They are certainly present, and I was quite cautious in my first year with them after tasting other fiano wines, but I haven’t found it an issue with our grapes - more of an interesting characteristic to be worked with, rather than against. I do lightly fine the juice but not much more than other aromatic varieties.” **MM**

Do you think fiano lends itself to barrel-fermentation?

“Yes. It can be like a warmer climate chardonnay, and has similar elements. I have even made a méthode champenoise with fiano recently.” **CW**

“Yes, but with neutral (old) oak and larger formats which are generally more generous in texture, while barriques show more structure.

In my benchmark tasting of fianos I found that new oak stood apart from the wine and distracted.

I have found that whole-bunch pressing followed by barrel ferment produces much more texture and greater depth of flavour than crush/press/settle and barrel ferment with a reasonable level of solids. No surprise really as the same is true for chardonnay.

I still like the tank fermented portion, as it offers greater aromatic lift and brighter fruit profile. The two different methods from the same grapes produce distinctly different wines which I then blend.” **MM**



The Tasting



2015 Witches Falls Wild Ferment Granite Belt Fiano Queensland wines have been accorded scant coverage by the southern media, but that doesn't mean they should be ignored. Vineyards in Queensland's key area, the Granite Belt, lie between 700 m and 1,100 m above sea level. John Beeston's "The Wine Regions of Australia" records the Mean January Temperature of Stanthorpe as 20.6° and a Heat Degree Days summation of 1611. Some sites are significantly cooler than that, and would compare with the Canberra District's figures of 20.3° and 1381.

The figures help explain this wine stylistically. The aromas are intense and complex, showing stone fruit, citrus and hazelnut, with a slight whiff of wild yeast/barrel ferment "funk". The palate offers excellent weight, freshness and texture. (Sold out) ★★★★★

2016 Serafino Bellissimo McLaren Vale Fiano Intense pear, citrus and melon show out vibrantly. The palate offers power and structure with grip and a talc-like texture. Impressive. (\$20.00) ★★★★★
<https://serafinowines.com.au/wine/shop/2016-serafino-bellissimo-fiano/>

2016 Artwine Wicked Step Mother Clare Valley Fiano The nose shows fresh ripe greengage plum aromas with a tropical overtone. There's no shortage of flavour, and it's backed by a fine texture with just-right phenolics. (\$25.00) ★★★★★
<https://www.artwine.com.au/product/>

2016 Juniper Margaret River Small Batch Fiano Fresh, intense, complex, with hints of lemon and green plum. It's a wine of good intensity, length, texture and acidity. A strong representative of the variety. (\$27.00) ★★★★★
<https://www.juniperestate.com.au/>

2016 Berton Vineyard Winemaker's Reserve Fiano We enjoyed the intense attractive floral/grapefruit aromatics. The palate is long and textural, with excellent acidity. Here's your chance to become acquainted with pure fiano at a bargain price. (\$14.00) ★★★★★
<http://www.bertonvineyards.com.au/product/Winemakers-Reserve-Fiano?pageID=E284538C-F8C9-BD5B-4110-B510707937EA&sortBy=DisplayOrder&maxRows=10&>

2017 Artwine Wicked Step Mother Clare Valley Fiano The very youthful nose shows lemon sherbet aromas – a little like verdello. The palate is attractively “slippery” and packed with flavour backed up by acidity. ★★★★★

2016 Higher Plane Margaret River Fiano This wine is still quite restrained, offering citrus and white peach aromas and flavours. The fruit richness is balanced by acidity and phenolic grip. (\$23.00) ★★★★★

2016 Oliver's Taranga Vineyard No.14/175 McLaren Vale Fiano The ripe pear and citrus aromas carry a touch of funkiness. The palate is one of substance and balance, with grip and acidity. (\$25.00) ★★★★★

2016 Feathertop Limited Release Fiano Good fresh pear plus hazelnut. A rich, long-flavoured wine with fine phenolics and the slightest hint of sweetness. (\$25.00) ★★★★★

The 2016 wine was whole-bunch pressed, underwent a long (six week), cool, wild yeast ferment in stainless and was then roughly racked and left on light lees for six months prior to filtration and bottling. It's a very fruit-driven wine, amplified by a high percentage of fructose in the 5 g/l residual sugar. (pH 3.25, TA 7.3 g/L) Our plan is to make a more complex, less fruit-driven style when our fruit comes on line but until then we will continue to make with the same grower fruit. Nick Toy

2015 Savina Lane Fiano Classico A Granite Belt (Qld.) wine that shows fresh pear/hazelnut characteristics. It offers admirable length and texture. (\$46.00) ★★★★★

2017 Tellurian Heathcote Fiano Fresh greengage plum aromas provide a positive introduction, and the tight, structured palate delivers the goods, although there will be more to enjoy in 12 months' time. (\$27.00) ★★★★★

2016 Bremerton Langhorne Creek Fiano Fresh and intense, with lemon and ripe pear characteristics. The palate is textural and restrained. (\$24.00) ★★★★★

2016 Summit Estate Fiano Restrained and lemony with a hint of hazelnut. We enjoyed the purity of flavour and the creamy texture. Another from the Granite Belt. (\$35.00) ★★★★★

2016 Jones Rutherglen Fiano Fresh, complex and interesting, showing stone fruit, hazelnut and oak. The finish is quite firm. ★★★★★

2015 Salena Estate Ink Series Fiano Pear, grapefruit and candied orange aromas. A textural style that is a tad sweet. ★★★★★

2015 Beach Road Langhorne Creek & Clare Valley Fiano Gold colour. Honeyed, toasty. A rich drink that is comparatively developed. ★★★★★

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2016 Ballandean Estate Messing About Granite Belt Fiano Fresh, rich, tropical. Quite complete and ready to drink. ★★★☆

2017 Oliver's Taranga Vineyard No.15/176 McLaren Vale Fiano Funky (very) and fruity on the nose. Much better palate. Good weight - slightly peachy. This wine has texture, grip and crisp acidity. Only recently bottled and needs time to settle down. It will follow the path of the 2016 (above). ★★★

2015 Jones Rutherglen Fiano Good colour. Rich, slightly honeyed pineapple nose. The palate offers weight backed up acidity and lingering phenolics. ★★★

2014 Signor Vino Fiano Fresh but mature lemon, peach, hazelnut nose. Fairly developed but still provides some drinking pleasure. ★★★

2014 Salena Estate Ink Series Fiano Quite honeyed. Richly flavoured, with a firm finish. ★★★

2016 Fox Gordon Princess Adelaide Hills Fiano Gold colour. Very honeyed, tropical and forward. ★★★☆

2016 The Overflow Estate 1895 Fiano Very aromatic, showing a gewürztraminer-like fragrance. The palate is firm and plain. ★★★☆

2016 Adélé Sunbury Fiano Deep colour. Shows development but is still fresh enough to drink. ★★★☆

2016 Rutherglen Estates Fiano Tropical/pineapple aromatics with a volatile edge. Sweet and sour. ★☆

Fiano is the ideal canvas for artistic winemakers. It responds well to the minimalist approach. The Berton Winemaker's Reserve typifies that, made in a similar manner to riesling. Treated like chardonnay (without new oak), it can be turned into a complex, textural dry white with a personality all its own.

That versatility is also reflected in its ability to perform in a wide variety of environments. The ★★★☆☆ wines hail from Margaret River, Clare Valley, Riverina, and, most notably, the Granite Belt. In fiano, Queensland may have found its signature grape variety. The signs from this tasting are very positive, and the fact that there were seven Queensland wines in the line-up shows that fiano is well and truly on the radar in the sunshine state.

Fiano won't sweep other grape varieties aside in the same way that chardonnay does, but it deserves to be taken seriously. Over the next few years you'll see it more often on wine merchants' shelves, and we urge you to become familiar with fiano as it cements its position among other high-quality white grape varieties.