

The Advertiser

Varieties: Romanesque reds

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ITALIAN varieties may not be part of Adelaide diners' regular wine diet but they have a profound stylistic influence on our winemakers and are being appreciated by a growing number of consumers. Last week, I looked at some significant white varieties. This week, it's the reds.

Sangiovese (san-gee-oh-vay-zay)

Pretty well the first name in Italian varieties, everywhere. There are 15, or more, made in SA. Few producers have worked with it for well over a decade as Coriole has, but everyone has struggled with clones, siting, canopy and cropping. Then they had to figure out how to make it, wrestling with its fierce acidity, drying tannins and a tendency to get easily swamped by oak and other varieties.

But the variety most identified with Tuscany and its famous Chianti is worth the trouble. It's capable of a range of intriguing aromas – prune/plum, cherry and tobacco, along with a savoury, but quite long and very lively palate.

There are a few approaches to sangiovese among SA makers. Of the "straights", perhaps Coriole and Versace's Ruspantino are the most earthy and savoury. More modern and polished wines come from Pikes, Cardinham and a biggie from Aldinga Bay. There's also a chunky and well-priced wine from Step Rd and vivacious new Sangiovese rose ('05) just out from Yalumba.

Inspired either by the dryness and acidity of the variety or by lots of Italian examples, some producers here prefer to blend sangiovese with another: Primo Estate's Il Briccone teams it up with shiraz, a natural ally; Versace also uses shiraz and cleverly includes grenache too, nominally French, but also a Mediterranean variety, in the Casalingo blend.

Mitchells also picks up this Med theme and partners sangiovese with the chunky mourvedre.

Sangiovese is exceptionally versatile for lots of food, but has a particular thing for tuna or mushrooms.

Zinfandel

Even if we call it by its Italian name, primitivo, "zin" is probably a bit of a stretch to include in a discussion of Italian varieties. A native of Puglia on Italy's southeastern coast, this unique grape, which treads the fine line between over and under ripeness, features rich aromas and flavours of berry, pepper and chocolate. But it does naturally deliver that savoury Italian palate.

A stylish example regularly comes from Kangarilla Road, with Nepenthe and Wayne Groom's Bush Block being the bigger beasts.

Sagrantino

The only other southern Italian variety to even begin to feature in Australia. Sagrantino, a native of Umbria, is the alternative to the less ripe and restrained reds going north. It's big, rich in earth, ironstone, raisin and mushroom, yet has almost fierce structure and acidity to keep it all in shape. How appropriate that we're about to see such a wine coming from the earth-meisters at d'Arenberg then Domaine Day.

Lagrein

A relatively obscure grape from Italy's far northeast, lagrein grabbed attention here when the Victorian Cobaw Ridge was voted best red at the Australian Alternative Varieties bash at Mildura for two years running.

Locally, Domain Day has harnessed the variety's rich, deep and vivid cherry fruit character well. Heartland recently released it in a successful partnership with dolcetto, a grape from the far northwest, which, like lagrein, can generate rich and saturated fruit colour and finishes quite dry and savoury. Dig out a recipe for that Piemontese springtime classic, Vitello Tonnato, and put one of these wines to work.

Barbera

A personal favourite, barbera seems to have it all – dark plummy juice and complexity, life and an easy food compatibility. It likes oak and seems to turn out pretty well – year in, year out – young vines or ancients. Huge amounts are grown in northern Italy. Here, excellent, chunky, table-friendly versions are turned out by Viottolo, Aldinga Bay and Massina, with real eye-catchers recently from Chalk Hill and Coriole. See it as a good alternative to pinot for Chinese duck.

Nebbiolo

The boss. The Americans call it pinot noir with 'tude, combining, as it can, a thrilling range of aromas from earth, licorice and fennel, mushroom and spices, through flowers, berries and perfumes. Sometimes a single wine from Piemonte's small zones of Barolo and Barbaresco may offer the lot. Just as easily, nebbiolo can be the "talking dog". It has a fierce tannin which seems to shut it all down sometimes. A double-decant is standard procedure.

Slowly SA makers are coaxing the best out of it. Excellent intros have been done by One Tree Hill and Longview, with more earthy and layered wines by Coriole and Bowe-Lees. Best so far is a lean and dry version with rose petal and fennel seed characters from Parish Hill and the darker licorice, truffles and finesse of the Joseph '02.

There's more

Significant varieties with Italian versions freely available in Australia are just not grown here. It's surprising that the fruity and structured corvina, mainstay of the Veneto's famous valpolicella and amarone wines, is not seen here. Likewise the earthy montepulciano grape of Italy's east coast has not appeared. Grab a bottle of the stunning D'Angelo Aglianico from Bottega Rotolo and you might be tempted to plant some aglianico yourself.

There are more discoveries yet. To find some of the locals, the best ranges seem to be at East End and Edinburgh Cellars and the Norwood Hotel. There's plenty of knowledge and enthusiasm on hand to guide you.