

‘Mildura, I’ll be back’



AN ALTERNATIVE VARIETY WINE SHOW IN THE NORTHEAST OF VICTORIA IS GATHERING MOMENTUM. KATIE SPAIN GETS UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH THE CREW.

WORDS KATIE SPAIN

I’m standing in one of Chalmers’ vineyards, winemaker Bart van Olphen to my left and a bunch of rock stars to my right. Mike Hayes (2017 Australian Winemaker of the Year) and Mark Walpole (*Gourmet Traveller’s* Perpetual Viticulturist of the Year) are chewing the fat. Nick Dry (nursery manager and viticulturist at Yalumba), Darren Fahey (development officer – viticulture, Department of Primary Industries) and Bruce Chalmers are inspecting new seedling trials. I feel like Kate

Hudson in *Almost Famous*, only these blokes are wine gods, not rock gods, and I’m trying to get into their heads, not their beds.

It’s a good place to do it, soak up knowledge that is. I’m here as the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show fellow. It’s an honour for a wine-obsessed storyteller who grew up surrounded by cows, not grapes. That’s the point, really. The team behind the annual national awards is all-inclusive and focused on spreading awareness about alternative varieties. In 2014 they instigated a

fellowship for wine enthusiasts to experience the show and become ambassadors for varietal misfits. Bellwether Wines’ Sue Bell encouraged me to enter. I didn’t feel worthy but when Sue talks you listen – and here I am, surrounded by varieties that are alien to me. Their names are pinned to posts at the end of each row. Nosiola, malvasia istria, arneis, lambrusco maestri, lambrusco salamina, negro amaro, refosco dal peduncolo, aglianico taurasi, aglianico vulture, montepulciano, graciano, pinot nero, marzemino, pavana,

barbera, kyoho, pione, falanghina and ansonica. The mind boggles but the Chalmers know their stuff. Over the past 15 years they developed a reference resource about the various clones and varieties they import. The list can be found on their website (chalmers.com.au) and is worth a gander.

Later, over a glass of smashing Chalmers Dott Pavana 2017 (the rarest grape in the Chalmers collection), it's obvious why such a wine show is important. New and emerging varieties are an exciting, intriguing, overwhelming and ever-changing part of the Australian wine landscape. Talking about them, drinking them and encouraging greater education and proficiency in producing them is a win for everyone.

The show happens in Mildura during November. Before I set off for northwest Victoria, people in the know hint of more than just a wine show. "You'll love it. It'll change you. It's like a wonderful big family. Just wait and see."

To be honest, I always thought wine shows were a little bit stiff. Turns out I was wrong. Cue food and wine writer Jane Faulkner, chief of judges. This energetic powerhouse adds wit and spunk to an otherwise serious business. She's been at the helm since 2012 (2018 is her last year before someone else takes the reins).

Meanwhile, show management Helen Healy, Kim Chalmers and Tennille Chalmers make the packed four-day shebang run seamlessly. It's one hell of an effort.

The judges are a motley crew, too.

Locally, the 2017 line-up comprises Tony Harper (retailer and wine writer from Brisbane's Craft Wine Store), Jo Burzynska (wine writer from Sydney), Fiona Donald (winemaker at Seppeltsfield Wines), Jonathan Creek (winemaker at Mildura's Zilzie Wines), Emma Norbiato (winemaker at Calabria Wines, New South Wales), Anna Hooper (wine retailer, Cape Jaffa Wines), Patrick White (sommelier at Mitolo Wines' Bocca di Lup restaurant), Steve Brown (winemaker at Coonawarra's Bellwether Wines), Stephanie Jacob (sommelier/wine buyer at Melbourne's Supernormal), Matthew Lamb (group beverage manager at Apples and Pears Entertainment Group), and Frank van de Loo (winemaker at Canberra's Mount Majura). They do the hard yards across four days of judging.

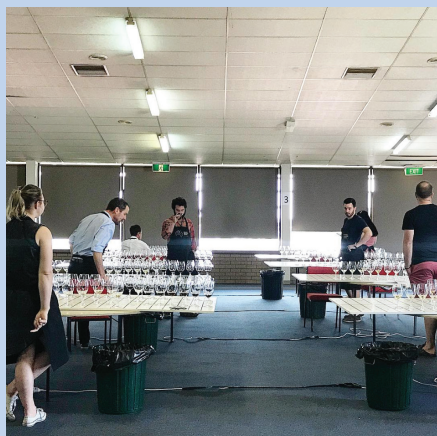
Hong Kong-based wine writer Eddie McDougall (aka The Flying Winemaker) is the guest international judge, while Zach Main (winemaker, formally of Angove Family Winemakers), Brigitte Rodda (winemaker, Eden Road Wines, ACT), Adam Walls (Wine Selectors wine buyer), and viticulturist Sam Bowman (Bowman Viticulture) are associate judges.

It's like watching a well-oiled machine at work. Anita Goode, owner/winemaker at Wangolina in South Australia's Mount Benson wine region, has a steward's eye-view. She enjoyed the experience so much she's heading back as chief steward this year. "It's go, go, go," she says. "One great thing about stewarding at this show is stewards are encouraged to try as many of the wines as they can. We also have our own Steward's Award to give out which is quite special. You don't see that very often. Also, Jane is a cracker. She is a bundle of energy and that's infectious. She's a wonderful chief judge to work with and a great educator as well."

Anita urges anyone interested in stewarding to get in touch via the AAVWS website.

"It's a national show so there's wine coming from everywhere and it may be stuff





AAVWS history

How did it start? In 1999 Stefano de Pieri, Bruce Chalmers and Dr Rod Bonfiglioli initiated the Sangiovese Awards and continued with the Australian Italian Wine Show in 2000. Following the success of both shows, the first Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show was held in Mildura in November 2001. Before Jane Faulkner, Max Allen (2005 to 2011) and Tim White (2001 to 2004) led the judging charge. Other heavyweights involved include Louisa Rose (chairman 2009 to 2016), Bruce Chalmers, Kathleen Quealy, Stefano de Pieri and Mark Walpole.

you may not have seen out in the market or find in bottle shops. Symphony Hill Wines for example, aren't available in Adelaide." It's hard but rewarding work. "Pouring, setting up... there's a lot of menial jobs you do but ultimately you get to see how the judging works. It means that later down the track, when you want to be a judge, you know the background of how everything works at a show." Anita entered her own creations and received gold for her 2016 Lagrein. She says the feedback is invaluable.

While the knowledgeable team sip and spit their way through entries, the public can get involved in a series of events. There's the spring-themed opening night dinner at Stefano's Café, the Talk & Taste session, and The Show Tasting, a chance for industry professionals and exhibitors to taste every single AAVWS entry. That's 823 wines (more than 100 varieties) and counting. For \$15 the public gets a look-in, too. The final event of the show is the Awards Long Lunch, held at the picturesque riverside Trentham Estate. It's a hot ticket. The menu is cracking and it's where AAVWS chair Ashley Ratcliff announces the winners. Hither & Yon cleaned up in the 2017 awards. Malcolm and Richard Leask won Best Nero d'Avola, Best Red Wine and Best Wine of Show for their 2017 Nero d'Avola.



I didn't see it coming but this wine show changed me. The AAVWS not only run a tight, professional ship, they do so with the warmth of a big, supportive family. I now seek out alternative varieties and the people who champion them. At the end of the day, I guess that's the point.

I'll return in November as a punter. It was that bloody good. Mildura is a beautiful part of the world to explore and the welcome is genuine. If weird and wonderful varieties are your jam, make a note in your calendar and book a houseboat for the weekend. For anyone interested in applying for this year's fellowship (do it), applications are open now and close on 24 August. ♦

AAVWS entries open in July and close on 14 September. Judging takes place in Mildura from 7 to 9 November and the Awards Long Lunch is held on 10 November. aavws.com

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

Mildura isn't just about citrus and great weather. Check these out while you're in the area.

Fossey's Ginporium & Distillery

Not technically an alternative variety but the gin flights here include a frontignac and shiraz gin elixirs.

Murray River Salt

These guys produce premium gourmet salt flakes using concentrated brine from the Mourquong Salt Mitigation Basin. The harvest site looks like snowfields and there's a store selling the good stuff.

PS Melbourne

A paddleboat is the best way to cruise the Murray. Jump aboard this historic beauty at Mildura Wharf and listen to the commentary during the trip to Lock 11 and back. Toot, toot.

National parks

You've got more than one million hectares of national parks to explore around the region. Get thee to an ancient dune and switch off for a while.

The Art Vault

A cracking art gallery in the town centre. It used to be a bank (paintings are stored in the old vaults).