

A future for the Riverland: an alternative view

Ashley Ratcliff

Nick Dry

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The Australian wine industry is in trouble. Over-supply, under-supply, heatwaves, drought and global financial crisis all mean that navigating a future path for the industry will not only take strong vision but will also require a great deal of planning.

During the industry's significant growth phase of the 1990s and early 2000s, wine consumers and commentators praised the innovative and inspirational approach the Australian wine industry took to position itself in the global market. The hard work of industry groups and individual wine companies took Australian wine to the world in a way never seen before.

But yesterday's allies have become today's critics, suggesting our industry has become greedy and boring. Right or wrong, such criticism should not be brushed aside without first trying to understand the reasoning behind such attacks. Some critics view Australia's offering of winegrape varieties as limited. Others point out that the potential impact of climate change will see detrimental changes to how and where grapes are grown in Australia.

There is a solution to every problem. While the Australian wine industry's 'big picture' issues such as the over-supply pressures need to be addressed by the national grapegrower and winemaker bodies, regional groups also need to work towards meeting the challenges they face in their own backyard. The recent development of the Riverland Alternative Wine Group is a good example of meeting this need: the group is already working on strategies to make the region's wines more exciting to domestic and international consumers, and to limit the potential impact of climate change.

A recent strategic Riverland Viticulture Technical Group planning

forum led to the formation of the Riverland Alternative Wine Group. "The aim of the strategic planning forum was to identify future challenges facing the region's wine industry and to then determine how these challenges could be met," said Andrew Weeks, chairperson of the Riverland Viticulture Technical Group. "Dealing with climate change, and introducing alternative grape varieties that suit the Riverland's hot and dry climate were identified as key challenges." The Riverland Alternative Wine Group will work closely with the Riverland Vine Improvement Committee, the Riverland Viticulture Technical Group, regional wine companies and commercial vine nurseries.

The interest in alternative grape varieties has been around for some time, but the adoption of most of the alternative grapes available in Australia has been slow and limited to a small number of varieties. The inaugural chair of the Riverland Alternative Wine Group, Ashley Ratcliff said: "The reluctance of the industry in the past 15 years to explore new grape varieties was partly because demand for mainstream varieties such as Chardonnay and Shiraz was strong, so the pressure to experiment with alternative varieties was weak. In addition, the viticultural and winemaking knowledge of how to successfully manage alternative varieties was limited. And in respect to climate change, the real concern regarding how to manage this global issue has only been front-of-mind for most grapegrowers and winemakers in recent times."

Yalumba Nursery viticulturist and committee member, Nick Dry, outlined that the initial focus for the Riverland Alternative Wine Group is to identify grape varieties that are heat- and drought-tolerant and can cope with long periods of extreme heat; produce an economically viable yield under drought conditions; and can make wines that are sought-after by consumers.

Finding a couple of star grape varieties that the Riverland can call its own is also one of the group's key aims. These 'star' varieties must have the appropriate physiological and phenological attributes that can lead to the development of a sought-after wine style, one that cannot be reproduced in cooler climates. While this will be a difficult and somewhat controversial challenge, it is an approach that, if successful, will greatly benefit the Riverland.

Despite only being officially formed in December last year, the group has already inspected the collections of alternative grape varieties planted at the Riverland Vine Improvement site at Monash and at the Chalmers Vineyard in Euston, renowned for its large selection of Italian grape varieties. During both visits, the temperature was in excess of 44 degrees Celsius; perfect for evaluating the heat tolerance of a number of alternative grape varieties.

These visits, in combination with two structured tastings, have identified some potential alternative grape varieties that may be well-suited to the Riverland. Riverland Vine Improvement Committee Manager and Riverland Alternative Wine Group member David Nitschke said: "White grape varieties such as Vermentino and Fiano handled the heat very well, as did red varieties such as Montepulciano, Nero d'Avola and Tempranillo. These grape varieties have the potential to make exceptional quality wines if managed appropriately."

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Learning from the mistakes of the past when it comes to the introduction of new varieties is critical for the success of any alternative grape varieties planted for the future. So the structure of the Riverland Alternative Wine Group is not restricted to grapegrowers and winemakers: committee members and supporters also include plant breeders, researchers, marketers and journalists.

Appointing strategically appropriate representation across all the sectors of the value chain will allow the Riverland Alternative Wine Group to acquire the necessary skills needed to link together the Riverland, individual alternative grape varieties and, ultimately, the consumer. "I think the passionate and innovative approach at the heart of the Australian wine industry successes in the past is still very strong, particularly at a regional level," said Ratcliff. "The formation of the Riverland Alternative Wine Group is just one encouraging example of this."

For further information, contact Ashley Ratcliff on 0411 370 057 or aracliff@yalumba.com

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"The 862 Compact Titrosampler has a high-precision measuring input and as well as connections for an intelligent dosing unit, stirrer and USB printer. The plug-and-play function means that complicated configuration of the connected devices is no longer necessary. The 862 Compact Titrosampler can be operated by mouse-click; various dialog options are available to adapt the instrument to the particular user."

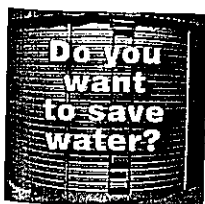
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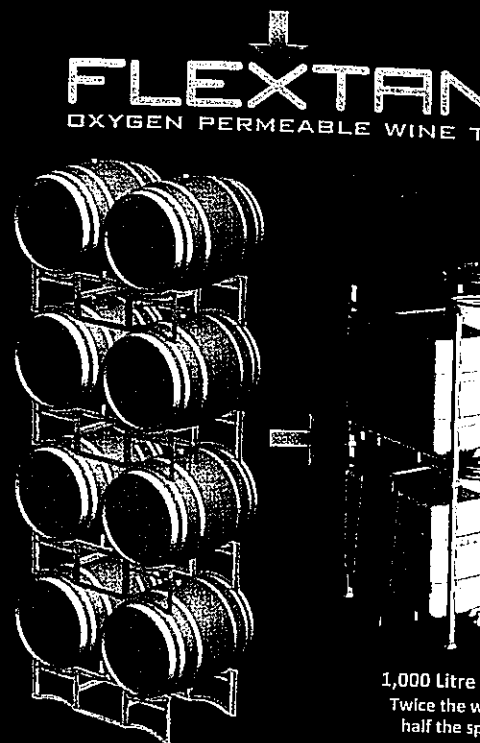
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