

Perseverance pays off for the masters of merlot

NICK RYAN THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM July 24, 2018

If George Lucas had turned vigneron like his contemporary Francis Ford Coppola did, there's a good chance Darth Vader would've had an evil hench-drone called D3V14 to help him spread darkness and evil throughout the galaxy.

D3V14 is a villain widely hated. Its failings are so widely derided that many have called for its destruction. It's the reason people try to establish their wine savvy credentials by refusing to drink merlot.

D3V14 is the clone of merlot originally selected from the Inglenook vineyard in the Napa Valley by researchers at University of California, Davis, in the early 1960s and first imported to Australia in 1965. It's the clone that made up virtually all the genetic material that fuelled the Australian planting boom of the 80s and 90s, when merlot surged from nowhere to become the third largest red variety crushed in this country.

Wine is one of those rare realms where discrimination on the basis of genetically inherited characteristics is openly encouraged.

The reasons why D3V14 may have been chosen — most likely a capacity for high yields — are swamped by the reasons why it probably shouldn't have.

It flowers and sets unevenly, which flows through to problems with uneven ripeness, problems exacerbated by many winemakers allowing it to ripen to the point of pudgy jamminess in order to avoid the weediness that bunches of uneven ripeness can deliver.

Winemakers who have opted for jamminess over weediness as the lesser of two evils have only managed to establish their equivalence.

The clone itself is only part of the problem, the tool a poor tradesman blames.

There have been some fine examples produced in this country by winemakers prepared to put in the vineyard work to better balance fruit and pay close attention to identifying the narrow window of optimal ripeness D3V14 offers, but too often merlot has been seen as a kind of vinous Spakfilla to fill out cabernet sauvignon's nooks and crannies.

That appears to be changing and a recalibration of Australian merlot might just be under way. Embracing diversity will be the key.

A number of new merlot clones have been brought into the country, including several sourced from Bordeaux, where merlot has historically performed best, and plantings of these clones are now hitting the age where their attributes can be properly assessed.

And just as importantly, there are winemakers prepared to do the hard yards with an out-of-

favour variety in the hope of shining new light on a grape that has been kept in the dark too long.

Merite Merlot 2015, Wrattobully, \$60

Colleen Miller and Mike Kloak had an interest in merlot when they established their vineyard at Wrattobully, South Australia, in 2000. Colleen now concedes that interest has mutated into an obsession. They have planted four new clones – 8R from Argentina, Q45 from Italy and 343 and 181 from Bordeaux — in addition to the D3V14 material that was the only real option when the vineyard was established. Each clonal parcel is vinified separately, allowing the distinctive characteristics to become apparent before a final blend is composed. That obsessiveness has paid serious dividends. This is as good as any Australian merlot I've seen.

It's a finer, tighter and more composed wine than most. It allows its internal architecture to be seen and felt without the layering or pillowy padding that can turn many merlots flabby.

It offers up aromas of plum skin, violets, snapped twigs and roast tomatoes that draw you into a beautifully shaped, elegantly framed wine with a willowy draping of uber-fine tannins. If this is where Australian merlot is going, then I'm very happy to follow.

www.meritewines.com

Gareth Belton Merlot, Basket Range 2017, \$40

Gareth Belton says merlot is like masturbation — most people are happy to enjoy it as long as they don't have to tell anyone about it.

Belton is also a natural pessimist who wondered if he might actually be stuck drinking at least half of this wine's minuscule 44-case production, but he sold out the entire allocation for bottle shops and restaurants in a day and has only a handful of bottles left on his website.

It comes from a small, schisty section of the Basket Range vineyard planted by the quixotic Phil Broderick long before all the natural winemakers called this part of the Adelaide Hills home.

It's entirely comprised of D3V14 and is the strongest possible piece of evidence to support the case this clone can do great things when you know how to treat it.

Belton picks just at the point of ripeness, avoiding both weediness and weight. The result is a gorgeously supple and slippery wine that glides across the palate like a greased pig pushed down a bowling alley. It has aromas reminiscent of perfect forest berries, spiced granola, spearmint, plum skins and thyme.

The acidity is lively, the tannins powdery soft and the wine just ripples with energy and life.

Easily drunk alone. Even better shared.