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Riesling by another name?

WINE with

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WE WERE tasting a dozen Chenins blanc from Dowie Doole when my Singapore compadre, Lim Hwee Peng, fixed me with a deliberate gaze and said: “To me these wines are so close to the Rieslings of Clare and Eden that I wonder if the Chenin fruit is expressing itself fully.”

Hwee Peng has impeccable credentials in wine assessment and education from Australia, Bordeaux, Burgundy, South Africa and California, amongst other vignobles. He was in McLaren Vale as star guest at the annual wine show.

“Chenin is an aromatic variety”, he said, “and yet here I feel the austerity and steely acidity of Riesling.”

He had a point. Apart from the two vintages with corks, 1998 and 2001, which were burnished gold and honeyed and tasted of lime marmalade with ginger, with occasional tweaks of apricot, the subsequent screw-capped wines were all vibrantly fresh limes and lemons, chalk and flint, built around a steely whiplash of natural acidity.

Very much after the form of those quirky austere Rieslings.

Thirty years ago, Chenin blanc was undergoing a huge transition in Australia. The honeyed, advanced, corked versions from Rutherglen and the Hunter were suddenly being nudged aside by very bright, fresh wines from Coriole in the Vales and Moondah Brook, a wild pioneering vineyard on a big sand dune in the sparse country north of Perth.

But I paid them little attention until a cellar of millions of bottles was opened for sale in the Loire Valley, the French home of Chenin. This was an old family winery called Moulin Touchais, and for some reason they’d been making wine for decades and simply stacking it away. They would leave the grapes hang until the Loire Valley’s persistent humidity triggered some botrytis infection, then they’d pick and vinify before the classic staunch acidity of the variety fell.

The Moulin Touchais wines were astonishing in their complex lime and ginger marmalade manner, the botrytis mould having added its trademark dried apricot. But they were fermented to dryness, and with all that humourless acidity, needed decades to be fully enjoyable. In the early ’eighties, we were drinking breath-taking treasures from 1947 and 1955. I remember taking a ’55 to Coriole, to share with Mark Lloyd, and we spent a balmy afternoon wondering whether we could make such wines in South Australia.

Fortunately, we have little botrytis in our arid air. It would wreak havoc in the varieties that don’t need it, which is most of what we grow. So thus far, botrytised Chenins are a rarity in Australia. Mark took some inspiration from the classical hand-engraved calligraphy of the Moulin Touchais label, applied it to his top reds, and went on making his steely, cheeky Chenins the way he always had.

For years his only rival in this part of the shelves was the Moondah Brook, which was perhaps even brighter and more steely than his Coriole. Then Hardy’s bought Houghton, which owned the Moondah vineyard, and pretty well destroyed the brand by suddenly releasing wines with heaps of sugar, but none of the counteractive, complexing flavours botrytis would have instilled.

Then, in the mid-’90s, Dowie Doole emerged with a rival for the Coriole: another bright, steely model, grown like the Western Australian wine in deep wind-blown sand at the Tintookie Vineyard of Drew Dowie and Lulu

Lunn in the gully at Blewett Springs.

The standout wine amongst the screw-capped Dowie Dooles was the oldest, the 2002 (93 points). This was complex, steely, seamless wine, very much after the lemon pith nature of those upland Rieslings, with an acrid topnote of flint and hessian.

So, is my Singapore friend correct in wondering whether we should be making Chenins so akin to the Rieslings of Clare and Eden? Maybe. But McLaren Vale has a dearth of crisp dry whites of distinction. Chenin fits perfectly in this gap, and presents no threat at all to the Riesling makers elsewhere. The other point is that these wines do have a point of difference: their texture is slightly heavier, and more waxy: as well as all that citrus character, they have the clean candlewax aroma which I find typical of Chenin, and can display honeydew and musk along with that subtle, but intriguing ginger.

Dowie Doole winemaker Brian Light has made two recent Chenins with native yeasts and plenty of good old-fashioned lees contact, to explore the wilder regions beyond the hyper-sanitary Riesling winemaking techniques used generally on Chenin. I have enthused widely about these complex Tintookie releases, but they failed to convince Hwee Peng.

Then I recalled two rare Tapestry McLaren Vale Rieslings I recently drank, made in 1993 and 94 from Bakers Gully and Kangarilla fruit by Brian Light. These were fresh, vibrant, delicately honeyed wines which were much more floral and pretty than any Vales Chenin, even at age: nothing like it at all. So while McLaren Vale's unique Riesling vineyards have been replaced by dull Chardonnay, the Eden/Clare Riesling nature of its Chenin may just as well fill that gap.

Unless global warming brings botrytis to McLaren Vale, in which case Chenin might just save the day.