

The White Knight

The demand for red wines may be on the uptrend but one white wine specialist who should not be ignored because he continues to thrill with his handcrafted white wines is none other than Pierro's Michael Peterkin, says Lim Hwee Peng.

As far as wine consumption is concerned, those living around the equator such as in countries like Singapore and Malaysia should be drinking more white wines than reds; for the simple reason that we are subjected to 'summer' all year-round. Moreover, the warm weather in the equatorial climate accompanied with high humidity is definitely a different type of summer experienced in Europe or North America.

Despite the climate, red wines are the darlings in this region while white wines have been shunned and accorded little respect. This, however, does not mean that whites are inferior to the reds in the quality spectrum. For white wine lovers like me, such a trend is celebrated because fabulous white wines can be purchased at a fraction of the cost of their more fashionable cousins in red.

In fact, wonderful white wines can actually thrill one's palate with intensity and freshness. Take the Pierro Chardonnay for example, a white wine that has been hailed as 'haut fashion with a contemporary twist' in the industry.



Wine Craft

PIERRO CHARDONNAY

THE ESSENCE OF PIERRO

There are wine enthusiasts who believe that one should understand the winemaker and his approach in crafting the wine to better appreciate the wine; for the soul and passion of the 'creator' can be experienced through the structure and flavour, among the many other elements of the wine.

When I was first introduced to Dr Michael Peterkin, winemaker and proprietor of Pierro Vineyard, the initial impression I had was that his wines were friendlier than their creator. Fortunately, this medical practitioner and qualified viticulturist, like some fine wines, opened up after some time, revealing an expressive individual who was somewhat mischievous but exuding warmth and sincerity, characteristics which I will always remember.

Peterkin is probably the only winemaker I know of who is into all things Chinese. He embraced the ancient Chinese martial art known as Tai-ji years ago and through such practice, not only was his knee ailment cured; his overall well-being has improved tremendously.

Peterkin's fondness for oriental culture is evident and embedded in another brand under his wine portfolio – the Fire Gully range – on the label one will see the Mandarin characters huo-gu meaning 'fire valley'. Such an oriental influence on Peterkin has provided him with discipline and valuable winemaking perspectives; such as having yin and yang or balance.

The Pierro Chardonnay handcrafted by Peterkin is elegant and flavourful. Pierro Chardonnay exudes great finesse and it is impressive in its power: tightly structured, possessing generosity in flavours of ripe melon and peaches, the wine has noticeable restraint and subtlety in its flavour element with an unctuous mouth-feel, and taut and fine acidity on the finish.

Widely recognised in the international wine scene, Pierro Chardonnay has gathered many international awards through the years and is considered to be among the best white wines worldwide. Jeremy Oliver, a highly respected wine writer in Australia has even said that "Pierro Chardonnay is the role model for many of Australia's more opulent and hedonistically proportioned Chardonnays and it is a stunning expression of Margaret River Chardonnay.

THE ACCIDENTAL ROOTS OF SUCCESS

The rise to fame was not an overnight phenomenon for Peterkin. Firstly, the odds were against him right from the start. His winery at Willyabrup, Margaret River covers a parcel of land which was scrubby, rocky and sloping; even his property agent advised him against acquiring the land. Even well-respected Tim Knappstein told Peterkin that he would never make it on his chosen ground.

Peterkin did make it. Sheer grit, single-mindedness and a strong belief in oneself allowed Peterkin to establish his winery and stay on its course for the past 30 years. Of course, having a winery close to his sweetheart, Shelley Cullen of Cullen Winery, helped a great deal, especially for mental strength. Peterkin eventually married Shelley Cullen and when speaking to the couple, it is easy to detect the romance between them which still sparkles.

Peterkin's initial plan was to establish himself as a Riesling specialist at his vineyard in the early days. So how did Chardonnay come into the picture? It was actually an unplanned for purchase that steered Peterkin to Chardonnay. He was actually helping a friend and what he did was to acquire a large order of Chardonnay rootstock from the vine supplier at a special price. The Chardonnay was planted and not only did the grape varietal flourish in his vineyard, it went on to produce one of the two finest Chardonnays in Margaret River. The Chardonnay clones used for making Pierro belongs to the Gin Gin clone and it was extremely well suited for the Margaret River terroir.

However, the first three vintages harvested from 1983 to 1985 were not up to scratch and Peterkin applied radical changes; the end-result is the Pierro Chardonnay that we know of today.

There is a saying: that 'great wines begin in the vineyard'; the Pierro vineyard is no exception. To ensure quality, the Chardonnay fruits have to be managed well; it is important to maximise leaves and cane exposure to sunlight, minimize wind damage during the gusty southern spring, and to heighten flavour development in the summer ripening season.

At the winery, Chardonnay fruit juice are gently extracted and put through 100% malolactic fermentation. This enables a superior texture and a more refined and persistent flavour.



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Through his Chardonnay and other wines within the Pierro vineyard have gained popularity over the years, Peterkin has expressed reluctance to increase his wine production. The implication? Demand for Pierro may well outstrip supply.

If a good story is required to enjoy a fine bottle of white wine, then the Pierro story with romance, drama, eccentricity and the triumph of the human spirit should compel wine lovers to sample a bottle of its Chardonnay. That is, if the Pierro Chardonnay can be found.



Shelley Cullen & Michael Peterkin

NOTABLE WHITE WINES

Among the white wines which I have come across in recent months, the following selection, though not exhaustive, are some of the more likeable ones and I am confident that red wine fans will also enjoy sampling these.

The listing is not in any particular order and includes both the old and new world white wines:

- Trimbach Gewurztraminer (Alsace, France)
- Pascal Jolivet Sancerre Blanc (Loire Valley, France)
- Domaine Faiveley Bourgogne Blanc (Burgundy, France)
- Domaine
- Hermanos Lurton Rueda Blanc (Spain)
- Rudera Chenin Blanc (South Africa)
- Catena Zapata, Single vineyard, Alto Chardonnay (Argentina)
- Rancho Zabacho Sauvignon Blanc (California)
- Ironstone Obsession Symphony (California)
- Geyser Peak Sauvignon Blanc (California)
- Shaw & Smith M3 Vineyard (Australia)
- Salitage Unwooded Chardonnay (Australia)
- Whitehall Lane Chardonnay (Australia)
- Cape Mentelle Semillon Sauvignon Blanc (Australia)



The key component in most of the wines featured would be the clean and pure fruit, with minimal distraction even for those that have undergone oak treatment. Some of those wines even offer complexity in their characters, as well as, superb ageing potential. Best of all, with the exception of a handful, most do not cost an arm and a leg.

With such wide range of 'delicious' white wines, will there be a day when white wine overtakes a market currently dominated by reds? This is definitely worth pondering over. Maybe we need another French Paradox proclaiming the benefits of white wines to first ignite increased interest?