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# WINE INEQUALITY

Have you heard anyone say that 2021 has been a great vintage? I swear this is all I've been hearing lately — how this year has picked up the game after last year's challenges. Ok, so 2021 is good, but what is good, and how do we define a good vintage?



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** Intense flavours are a marker of these wines; The grapes for 'big red' wines are often grown in warmer climates; The Yarra Valley Vineyards

We've all heard that not all wine vintages are born equal. Some believe in the uncanny magic of an even year, while others collect special bottles based on the birth years of their children. But are these good determining factors for your next collectable?

In a product like wine, where potential setbacks at every step of the production process are as normal as the creative solutions that offset these issues, is there such a thing as a better vintage? You bet there is! And if you believe that, you may as well start believing in weather gods too!

Going back to my favourite concept that good wine starts in the vineyard, let's take this as our starting point. From the very beginning of bud burst in the vines, grape growers are in a season-long battle with the weather to produce quality grapes with a high concentration of flavours and good acid structure. These two factors determine the aromas and flavours of the wine, where the acidity will provide a strong backbone and the sugars will turn into

alcohol. Therefore, it is important they are well balanced and are what winemakers test for when deciding harvesting time.

If you were to ask a grape grower what a perfect season looks like, you'd probably get told something along the lines of 'consistent weather conditions, no sudden temperature fluctuations, not too hot, not too cold, not too wet, not too dry.' As in any agricultural industry, the weather plays an integral part for the grape growers and in a 'good' year everything flows smoothly, with no immutable consequences, even when little hiccups happen. On a 'bad' year, however, seemingly insignificant circumstances can trigger a chain of events that can lead to a total disaster.

One of the biggest threats comes at the very beginning of the season, when the sun shines a little too brightly before the winter cold nights give up their tendency for frost. While we, as humans, often welcome the early spring warm days, grape growers pray for these not to be warm enough to begin bud burst. If young green shoots appear on the vines too early, they are at



a great risk of not surviving the cold frosty nights. And even if some do survive, this kind of situation is likely to result in a low yielding year.

The second most dangerous threat is excess precipitation. While some rain is great for providing a valuable water resource, prolonged periods of rain may just do the opposite. Without a chance for the vine canopy to dry out, there's huge pressure on the plants to withstand fungal diseases. Fungus, being one of the most volatile organisms on the planet, can quickly spread to leaves and berries and strip the grapes of precious resources. This leaves the vines unable to adequately develop bunches, in turn resulting in lessened flavour concentration of the fruit.

In this situation some might argue that fungus is an easy fix with timely spraying — which is true to a point — however, if it rains non-stop, the spray washes off, reducing the efficiency considerably. During a particularly wet season, it gets too expensive to repeat spraying.

Wet weather can be particularly bad right before picking too, as plants want to take in as much water as possible. The water it can't use straight away gets stored, and the natural place for it is in the berries. In the best case, this will lead to flavour dilution, in the worst, the skins will burst from too much water. The microbes and natural yeast that live on the grapes will then get access to the sugars in the berries and will result in fruit rot or even fermentation — not something you want to happen while grapes are still on vines.

Now we've talked about too wet, let's look at too dry or too hot. First of all, water is a

primary source for development of fruit, and in case of prolonged dryness, the vines won't be able to develop lush canopies, will have underdeveloped shoots and brunches, and therefore lower concentration of aromas and flavours. This is especially bad at the start of the season when shoots are just starting to develop. This is often a lesser problem than 'too wet', as it can be solved by watering, so becomes an issue of irrigation costs.

A much greater problem can occur during heat waves. It's known that at 42 degrees proteins start to denature, so the plants' natural response to heat over 42 degrees is to shut down. On a freak hot day, it will have enough immediate resources in the system to survive, so won't cause too many issues. However, during a long heat wave, plants will start to extract resources from the berries, thus maturing in reverse, resulting in underdeveloped flavours.

I talk a lot about the concentration of aromas and flavours, and this is because getting these two components right is needed to create good wine. There are plenty of factors, which without prompt response, can lead to disastrous outcomes when it comes to grape growing. The climate and weather patterns play huge roles in determining the quality of the fruit, but so do the experience and correct responses of the grape growers in whatever curveball situations mother nature decides to throw. In reality, there is no such thing as perfect weather patterns, but there's years that pose less or easier to solve problems than others, and they are the ones that often get the esteemed title of a 'good vintage'.

## UP TO TASTE!

### 2020 BOAT O'CRAGIO GRUNER VELTLINER

I've been in love with this release of Gruner Veltliner! It's crisp, fresh, punchy and light. I often find that Gruner Veltliner can be quite fruity and a bit too sweet for my liking, but not this one! There's a lot of citrus and crisp green apple on the palate, finishing clean and sharp, leaving you longing for more.

### 2019 SOUMAH HEXHAM VINEYARD VIOGNIER

With a beautiful straw yellow colour, this wine is beauty to look at! This wine is really quite long and vibrant on the nose, starting with fresh stone fruits like mango, apricot and nectarine that are quite seductive. Then the aroma is accessorised with a ginger spice undertone. The palate is a rich and interesting combination of musk candy, juicy stone fruit and linear acidity. A great and complex winter white!

### 2020 NEPENTHE MENCIA

For me this was a new grape variety to taste, as Mencia is quite rare in Australia. Expect the unexpected in this wine — the aromas are rich in red berries, while notes of forest floor and crushed ants add complexity. The palate is full of berries, but not what we are used to. There are red currants, goji berries, rowan and rose hip berries. The finish has notes of eucalyptus and white pepper, which is quite common, but unique to Australian wines. All in all, a great wine to try when you're after something different.

### 2016 BRADN'S LAIRA 1968 VINES CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Get ready, it will be a while until you get to tasting it. Let's work through this intriguing complex aroma first. Imagine walking through a fruit and veggie market: fruit section first, plum, blackcurrant, dark cherry; then into the spices section (Indian spices), bay leaves, chilli pepper, cinnamon, black pepper, saffron, nutmeg. Finally, let's taste: medium bodied, silky and persistently long, plum and crab apple jam. This is the wine that takes you on a journey!