

Max allen writes about wine:

“DOOMED TO REPEAT?”

We have to go back to go forward.

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FIRST, some simple wine trivia to put you in the mood. Who were the following people, and what role did they play in the history of Australian wine? Doctor Thomas Henry Fiaschi; Charles Malpas; and John Niewenhuysen.

Time's up. Fiaschi is probably the most familiar name: in the late 19th century, this Sydney surgeon had a vineyard and cellar at Sackville Reach on the Hawkesbury River, where he planted Italian grape varieties, pre-dating the current trend for sangiovese, pinot grigio and nebbiolo by at least 100 years.

Malpas may ring one or two bells: he was the Geelong-based inventor who, in the late 1960s, perfected the airtight tap technology that allowed the successful mass production of wine in cask - an innovation that was, famously, taken up by Ray King and David Wynn, two names which are undoubtedly much better-known than Malpas.

And Niewenhuysen? Anybody? Well, without this Melbourne academic's 1986 report into the arcana of Victorian liquor licensing, that state's ground-breaking 1987 Liquor Control Act may not have been passed, and Melbourne wouldn't be home to today's proliferation of bars, relaxed restaurants and wine venues that are the envy of wine-lovers in Sydney. (Okay, it's a cheap shot; but as a Melburnian, I couldn't resist.)

If you didn't recognise any of the three names, don't worry: I'm not sure many in the Australian wine industry would. Australians tend to have a fairly careless attitude to their history: why should wine people be any different?

I started drinking and falling in love with wine and really learning about it when I was living in the UK. One of the strongest attractions was the fact that each wine - particularly one from an old, established

region - was bottled history; as Maya says in the film *Sideways*, 'I like to think about what was going on the year the grapes were growing; how the sun was shining; if it rained. I like to think about all the people who tended and picked the grapes. And if it's an old wine, how many of them must be dead by now.'

Not long after I arrived in Australia from the UK, twelve or so years ago, I made the trek out to Penfolds Magill in Adelaide suburbia. Having drunk - and been blown away by - Grange, it was a kind of pilgrimage. But I was amazed to find that Magill wasn't open to the public. This was before the restaurant, before the tours, before the rejuvenation of the winery and restoration of the cottage. I remember thinking, how odd; here was this prime piece of history, the home to a worldwide wine icon, and it's not bloody open. What's more, I soon found many other examples of Australian wine history being ignored, shut away or undervalued.

Things are better than they were. The success of Magill (now very much open to the public) and other heritage-focussed developments such as Tahbilk's great small museum has prompted many wineries and wine regions to make the most of their past in an attempt to attract more visitors in the present.

But we are still in danger of overlooking some very important innovations - and very important people. As Huon Hooke reported when Guenter Prass won the Maurice O'Shea award in 2004, 'Younger readers may ask: "Guenter who?"'

Why is it important that Magill is a showpiece of wine history? Why is it important that people know who Guenter Prass, Charles Malpas and John Niewenhuysen are?

Well for a start, there's George Santayana's famous and oft-quoted phrase 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. But there's more to it than that. Just as knowledge of a wine's cultural and historical context can give you deeper appreciation and possibly enjoyment of that wine, a knowledge of broader wine history can give you a deeper understanding and appreciation of the modern industry - which in turn can help you develop ideas for the future.

Here's some more wine trivia for you. Who said:

1. 'Lawyers, doctors and men of means ... planted vineyards by proxies. Various syndicates were formed for a large extent of vines. In four years over two thousand acres were planted. Speculation, fashion, public opinion, all were pointing to prosperity.'

2. 'We must say these pretended "gouts de terroir", earthy tastes, are often only ... a little trickery on the part of the proprietors, who find it convenient to attribute to the soil the evils caused by their casks. The taste from the soil appears less objectionable to the purchaser than a bad taste from the cask, and, generally, he accepts the innocent illusion without further reflection.'

3. 'Australian chardonnay is the new Liebfraumilch.'

Now, number one sounds like someone talking about the planting boom that followed the launch of Strategy 2025 in 1996, doesn't it? Actually (and the Victorian language probably gave it away) it's Hubert De Castella, founder of St Huberts vineyard, talking about the Yarra Valley planting boom in the 1880s.

The second quote is not some killjoy scientist from the AWRI, debunking the myth of terroir, but is in fact Dr Alexander Kelly, founder of Tintara vineyard, quoting Machard, a French writer, in *Wine Growing In Australia*, published in 1867.

And the last one? Well it could be one of many of today's UK (and Australian and American) wine hacks, bemoaning the export popularity of decidedly sweet wines such as Yellow Tail chardonnay. But as far as I can tell, it was first said, in print, by cranky UK journo Stuart Walton as far back as 1993.

All of which tells us there's nothing new under the sun. Been there, done that. Even the most cursory study of Australian wine history turns up the most incredible parallels with today. There's P.B. Burgoyne, UK merchant and importer, complaining of too much new oak flavour in South Australian red wines in the early 1900s. There's the all-singing, all-dancing 1970s TV ad for Hardys Sparkling Swinger ('champagne and orange is its game, Sparkling Swinger is its name!'), preceding Hardys Omni Citrus and Killawarra Dusk and the other fruit-flavoured bubbly by more than a generation. And there's the mainstream media raving about the Australian wine now being sold in a can in Japan, describing it as 'a first for Australia' and 'innovative' but I can remember selling wines in cans at the bottle shop I worked at in the UK in the late 1980s.

It's particularly important, I would argue, for the wine media to be well-read and fully aware of Australian wine history. It's the media's job to both put the present into context and to record present events accurately for posterity. And it's hard to do either if you don't know how - and why - things are as they are.

Here's another game: can you name the top ten best-selling bottled wines, by volume, in Australia in 1984 (according to a survey conducted by the Good Weekend magazine)? And can you also name the top ten best-selling wines in 2004 (according to AC Nielsen data)? The answers are below, but see how many you think you can get before you peek. It's a simple but fascinating comparison that says so much about how Australia and Australian wine drinking habits have changed - and, in some ways, how they haven't - over the last twenty years. Just look at the popular varieties, and the nomenclature, and the proliferation of sparkling wines - both then and now (there's a clue for you).

Sometimes, of course, people deliberately choose to ignore history. Take screw caps, for example. I am a big supporter of the use of screw caps. But there are plenty of potential technical problems associated with screw caps that inexperienced winemakers may not be aware of - most of which have been written about extensively. And yet, I am seeing a large number of new wineries bottling all of their wines under metal, first vintage, red, white, sweet. Not only that, but the last time screw caps were tried in Australia 25 years ago, they didn't catch on. If I were a small producer thinking about bottling all my wine under screw cap, I'd want to be doing as much research as I possibly could - both technical and historical. And I'm not sure the small producers *are* doing that research.

Look, too, at the succession of grand, money-making businesses that have flourished and crashed in the Australian wine scene in the late 90s and early 00s. Vincorp, Wine Planet, Wine Orb, Heritage ... The list goes on: companies that promised too much too soon, that grew too big too quickly, that got greedy or were the victims of greed. And yet, every time another one appears, industry and investors alike seem to forget the pain of the past. It's like letting a serially-abusive spouse into the house for 'one last chance' ('It'll be different this time, I promise ...').

Sometimes an acceptance of history can take one in interesting philosophical directions. Take, for example, the ongoing discussion

about 'terroir' in Australia, and the search for individual vineyard sites that can produce wines with a strong sense of place - like they do in Europe. While I think this is a great development for Australia, and is producing some delicious wines, if you look back at Australian wine history, you'd have to argue that *our* tradition is actually to blend across vineyards and regions. Rather than hold Burgundy up as the benchmark, then, shouldn't we be aspiring to reach the dizzy heights attained by O'Shea, Preece and Schubert? Wouldn't wines that reflect *this* heritage have give us more integrity?

And wading through the past can often inspire new ideas for the future. An excellent example of this is Peter Lehmann's re-introduction of the shiraz muscadelle blend (the brand is known as The Mudflat, another reference to Len Evans' memorable 1960s description of Lehmann). It harks back to Lehmann's days at Saltram in the 1960s, when the white grape would be added to the red to make a more fragrant, softer wine - called burgundy then, of course. So much more interesting and has so much more integrity than yet another bloody shiraz viognier blend (made by somebody who's probably never even *drunk* Cote Rotie), don't you think?

Now, the last trivia question. Who said 'No wood, no good ...'? Was it a) Kathleen Quealy; b) Larry Flynt; or c) Wolf Blass?

And the answer is ... none of the above. It was in fact John Glaetzer, Wolf Blass' winemaker. But any student of Australian wine history would have known that.

ANSWERS

TOP TEN BEST-SELLING AUSTRALIAN WINES

THEN

1. Kaiser Stuhl Summer Wine
2. Seppelt Great Western Champagne
3. Leo Buring Liebfrauwine
4. Lindemans Ben Ean Moselle
5. McWilliams Sparkling Bodega
6. Penfolds Minchinbury Champagne
7. Seaview Champagne
8. Miranda Golden Gate Sparkling
9. Wolf Blass Rhine Riesling
10. Woodley's Queen Adelaide Riesling

NOW

1. Jacob's Creek Pinot Noir Chardonnay Brut
2. Yellowglen Yellow
3. Jacob's Creek Chardonnay
4. Lindemans Bin 65 Chardonnay
5. Penfolds Koonunga Hill Shiraz Cabernet
6. Evans and Tate Classic Dry White
7. Houghton White Burgundy
8. Yellowglen Pink
9. Brown Brothers Crouchen Riesling
10. Queen Adelaide Chardonnay

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