

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Wine is not just a drink - it's an education

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by Tim White

As is not uncommon, I was getting a bit excited about wine: a 2014 Feudi Bizantini Ikonia Pecorino from the Terre di Chieti in Abruzzo in this case. I was at my local – and favourite – butcher and deli: Marino Meat and Food Store in Adelaide.

"Pecorino, exactly like the cheese?" manager Marilena Marino asked. "Why is it called pecorino?" Stopped in my enthusiastic tracks and somewhat embarrassed, I confessed: "I don't know ... but I will find out."

And I meant it. Because you never, ever stop learning about wine. Or any of the other beguiling alcoholic beverages that mankind first began playing with and paying considerable attention to 5000 and more years ago. (If you're Paleo, stop reading now).

So to assess key references: my favourite book on Italian wine, *Life Beyond Lambrusco* by Nicholas Belfrage, has no mention of pecorino in the index. It is listed in Burton Anderson's *Wine Atlas of Italy*, but there's no detail. The new masterwork, *The Oxford Companion to Wine* describes where pecorino is principally grown, the style of wine it produces, and synonyms.

The equally redoubtable landmark volume, *Wine Grapes* (by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding and José Vouillamoz) offers even more detail, including the origin of the name, "from pecora, meaning sheep". Which is fairly obvious for anyone familiar with pecorino, the cheese.

Wikipedia's entry suggests folklore in the Marche region has it that pecorino, the grape, is a particular favourite of sheep grazing in the vineyards. Until I visit this part of Italy, in early 2017, this will do for me, as there are similar grape-naming precedents. One is the white cultivar, vespaiola (not to be confused with Piemonte's vespolina) which contributes to such delicious sweet wines as torcolato in the Veneto and is said to be named after the wasps attracted to its sugary berries.

Now, it's my living (or part of it) to learn as much as I possibly can about wine, and taste as much as I possibly can, to understand its multifarious and ever-metamorphosing manifestations. But the yearning to find out more about the stuff occurred years back when, as a complete and utter oeno-neophyte (beer being my first love), I was enthralled by a chance glass of red thrust arbitrarily into my hand. It impelled me to request a decent wine encyclopaedia for Christmas.

Years later, I attended my first wine course, convened by Sydney wine merchant Christopher Hayes at the legendary wine hang-out, Bulletin Place. Hayes' style was engaging, educational obviously, and entirely without pretension (unless, that is, you baulk at the subject of wine's sometimes arcane vernacular). Which is the way all good wine educators conduct themselves and every major metropolitan centre in the country still has independent wine merchants which conduct general and specialist wine courses through the year.

The retail chain United Cellars, for example, is convening a series of "Grand Cru Blanc" tasting events in February, hosted by Brisbane sommelier Peter Marchant in Sydney, Perth, Melbourne, and his home town. As the event's name, and price tag of \$250 suggests, the wines being "shown" (to deploy a little wine lingo) are predominantly high-end French, but some Aussie and Italian is also included.

If you seriously want to up the ante, you might invest in one of the courses run by providers accredited by the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET), which run from day-long Level 1 units to many levels beyond.

The important thing to remember, no matter what study or level of course you apply yourself to, is that verbal expression of what you are tasting is highly encouraged. Nay, essential. You've got to drop any preconceptions as to why or what wine tastes like at the door. It is my experience, and this has been confirmed by a number of wine educators, that the blokes are most reluctant to express the detail of what their sensory faculties communicate to them.

When I'm encountering new smells and tastes in unfamiliar styles of complex liquids, I try to maintain an objective palate (although predilections for certain attributes do run deep).

For an idea as to how the same taste is interpreted by different palates you could do far worse than check out the episode "Pedro's Cough" from the *Peppa Pig* animated children's series. As the cough does the rounds among Peppa's school friends and parents, the medicine prescribed by Dr Brown Bear is variously described as tasting like: "... an old shoe full of jam" (Pedro Pony); "... carpet-flavoured yoghurt" (Suzy Sheep); and "... of flowers" (Danny Dog).

When Dr. Brown Bear himself catches the cough and gets a literal taste of his own medicine, he says: "It tastes like jammy, yoghurt-flavoured, custard socks." So don't be sheepish: it can be exciting encountering new smells and flavours, even if you don't know where they come from.

WHAT TO DRINK

Jean-Claude Boisset 'Les Ursulins' Chardonnay 2013 [Bourgogne, France]

Has a quince-almond sort of smell about it, and peach fuzziness. Luscious, deep and easy, and grainy in a positive way; has a density about it like a quince tart. A wonderful comfy chardonnay, in fact, with excellent texture. 92/100, \$35 (dortodoor.com)