Australian Sparkling Wine: Style Definition

IAN McKENZIE
Chief Winemaker, White and Sparkling Wines, Southcorp Wines

We have been producing sparkling wines in Australia for over 100 years. To give you some idea of the current level of production the Australian Bureau of Statistics June 1992 wine sales analysis indicated sales of almost 3.75 million cases. Of this almost 25% was bulk fermented (i.e. charmat) or carbonated. The other 75% of sales was sparkling wines produced by that method established by the Champenois in France so many years ago, whereby base wine undergoes secondary fermentation in bottle and remains on yeast lees for at least the minimum 6 months prescribed by current Australian regulations.

Something like 80% of sparkling wine produced by this method is made from grape varieties other than the classic Champagne varieties Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay, and virtually all these wines are sold in Australia under the name 'Champagnes'. Clearly the only relationship with the French product is that the products are perceived by the French consumer as a beverage that has some points in common with the prestigious French wine.

The other 20% of sales was sparkling wines produced by the traditional method established by the French. Here we are really in its infancy. We were using virtually none of these wines until about 15 years ago. Even those that were produced were sourced from the traditional table wine grape growing areas, which are warm and at best moderate in climate.

The French established over a century ago that these varieties produce great sparkling wines, and it generally holds true that no matter where in the world they are grown they produce wines of a style and quality that is superior to other varieties—provided of course the winemaking is up to the mark.

We have obviously learnt a great deal from the French and that has accelerated the development of our sparkling wines. While Champagne tends to be the role model most Australian winemakers use, I personally believe that we are deceiving ourselves if we think for one minute we can produce a sparkling wine of the exact style of Champagne. We all know that winemaking techniques and practices can only go so far in the matching of wine styles and that the most important and overriding element is the grape itself. The reason we have unbounded diversity in wine styles is that we have even greater diversity in grape growing regions and practices, and for this reason it is very difficult to define an Australian style.

We have to our own satisfaction proven that the classic varieties when grown in cool and cold climate regions produce finer, more elegant and higher quality base wines. However, this is a big country and we are a long way from establishing which regions are the ideal. We clearly have some views on that but we are not confined to a discrete area, as is the case for Champagne. We are at liberty to blend from a host of regions, all of which have individual characteristics, and we as winemakers are endeavouring to produce what we individually perceive to be the ultimate Australian style.

What I am pleased to say is that there is an increasing number of very good quality wines being produced, which are inevitably compared with Champagne, but are none-the-less world class, distinctly Australian and proud of it!