I don’t intend to tangle with technology, make wild prognoses for the future, speak of changes in wine law, variables in currency exchange, grape clones or joint ventures in the Mediterranean.

Rather, I will focus on a Mediterranean marketing perspective that has touched me in the past four years—how we can learn from it, emulate it, and use it to our advantage.

Aunt Mabel, wine consumer of yesteryear, had an annual bottle of Matuska for her birthday and was satisfied by it—she knew no better, and for her it was an occasion. She has been replaced by the ‘20-30-somethings’ (with a generation in between), who are adventurous, educated, who travel, are curious and opinionated. They are the wine consumers of today and will influence tomorrow, and their lifestyle is an art form. They are interested, demanding and worldly. They are not slaves to fashion, and while they may not know why they like a particular wine, they make their wine choices based on a taste/price ratio and how well it matches with their food— not slaves to fashion, and while they may not know why they form. They are interested, demanding and worldly. They are curious and opinionated. They are the wine consumers of today, and will influence tomorrow, and their lifestyle is an art form. They are interested, demanding and worldly.

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The grape varieties and wine styles of the Mediterranean offer them new and different dimensions in taste—an addition to their wine drinking repertoire. For them, drinking wine is a common experience—the norm rather than the exception—though it would be foolish to suggest that all these emerging consumers are the norm of their demographic group. Rather, they are the new, young wine cognoscenti, pushing up their parents’ generation. Their parents, who have collected cellars of varying quality, are not so flexible in their taste, and may even be threatened by the notion that those cellars that they have put down and invested in may not necessarily be the way of the future. The parents are prepared to wait, remaining conservative, and do not make such universal choices in wine as their children.

Why are we drinking more wine from the Mediterranean—varietals and blends imported to Australia—and increasingly now, made here?

Traditional Australian wine culture led us to believe that a good wine is one you can talk about for 30 minutes. It fed us clichés such as ‘he’s mellow like a good wine’, or ‘like a good wine, she improves with age’. It led us to expect ‘in your face’ fruit flavour and oak character, and that we should search for big, full-bodied reds. We read editorial comments from conservative, Francophile wine writers who believed that Burgundy and Bordeaux were the ideal, and that those styles should be our benchmark.

But consumption is changing. In 1993-94 the value of wine imported into Australia from Italy was AU $11.5 m, and it is estimated that by the end of 1995, the value of wine imported from Italy will be about $13.9 million—a jump of 20.8% in 12 months, despite changes in the exchange rate against the lira that favoured our dollar!

Ian Cook from Sydney’s Five Ways Cellars notes that his sales of Italian wine have more than trebled in the past two years. His customers are turning away from full-bodied Australian reds to light-medium bodied Italian reds—great food wines, away from more assertive fruit characters to more savoury fruit characters—and it is the reds that outsell the whites.

In the past four years I have met many visiting Italian wine merchants who have made no bones about their focus on filling the wine shortfall here caused by our exports. I have travelled twice to Italy as the guest of the International Olive Oil Council (IOOC), to study their food, lifestyle and wine, in company with a large contingent of Japanese, even more North American (and sundry Australian) wine and food journalists from all sections of the media. The first trip I took was to Puglia and Campania; the second to the north. On the second occasion, with a large contingent of importers from the above countries, the itineraries were tailor-made to suit each group—it was very, very serious marketing. A there are no free lunches in life or journalism, the expectations of the organizers of such trips are established first, and you may have read and heard reams of editorial on the benefits of the Mediterranean diet.

The IOOC also took equal numbers to Morocco, Turkey and Spain, and Australia has received subsequent visits from large contingents of Greek and Tunisian food and wine exporters. The net result is that the wines, food and lifestyle of the Mediterranean are becoming very well understood here.

In the past five years we have seen a reformation in the kitchens of many Australian restaurants. While we have had a brief but serious flirtation with chilli, most of the affordable brasseries and cafes frequented by emerging wine drinkers feature Mediterranean-style menus—food that simply does not sit comfortably with many of the traditional wine styles of Australia. These menus have made a place for light medium-bodied reds, and lower-alcohol styles. The Italian style of food and eating is particularly appropriate to our lifestyle, our appetites, and increasingly the produce that we are growing. Australian winemakers are also contributing by changing the whole consciousness of the approach to wine drinking by educating the consumer—but keeping a foot in both camps by continuing to make ‘serious’ wines (those big, full-bodied tannic reds that need cellaring)—and developing easier, more approachable drink-now styles which arguably may provide the cash-flow to support the ‘serious’ wines.

A few months ago, I visited Spain with Tim White, Gay Bilson, John Newton and three others, as guests of the Spanish Institute for Foreign Trade. We visited Seville, San Sebastian and Logrono, in the heartland of Rioja. It was called A gourmet tour, and indeed it was—if I ever needed confirming that wine and lifestyle is the most effective marketing combination for the Australian wine industry, it was confirmed. We saw an ocean of wine, a sea of vineyards and constant evidence of improved vinification—a combination of traditional methods with advanced technology—in order to produce better wine. Here was a situation where journalists
from appropriate magazines and newspapers and one of our most influential restaurateurs were chosen to go forth as disciplinarians for what was the most seductive lifestyle: the tradition of tapeo—the mixture of wine, food and fashion—the manzanilla/fino/red wine experience: lots of small bites and plentifully married successfully with the wine. A sin Italy, the wine was food-friendly—designed to cut through the olive oil-laden food. Our job as influencers is to educate our readers and titillate them with accounts of our experiences, which they in turn will want to try.

The Spanish followed that by sending a large contingent to Sydney for the Fine Food Fair, showing their wine and food to the food service industry, and again to a group of selected chefs, restaurateurs and importers, at an invitation-only dinner.

Tim White challenged the quality of Spanish wine imported into Australia, and consequently was invited to chair a tasting of some of the best that Spain has to offer, specially imported by the Spanish Government. The event took place in December at the Bennelong restaurant, with Gay Bilson designing appropriate food for a selected group of writers, chefs, wine merchants and winemakers.

Australan wine companies should take a leaf from this book: winemakers should work in tandem with new wave chefs and restaurateurs and—at my peril—direct information not only to wine writers but to those who write wine lists (i.e. the Australian Sommeliers' Association). They must also target those who design menus, matching your wine with their food. A lot of Italian design in labels and bottle shapes has been copied, but Mediterranean concept of the marriage of food and wine seems to have been overlooked as a highly effective marketing tool. (with very few exceptions of which Brown Bros is the most notable, and latterly Mitchelton and Grant Burge.)

We have also overlooked lifestyle as a wine marketing ploy. The wine industry lives it—you have a remarkably erudite community with a bunch of eminently marketable winemakers that could be used as are chefs in visual productions—why not the cult of the winemaker? Why not the travelling winemaker, seen in Italy, with travelling cult figures such as Angelo Gaja and Pierro Antinori? For obvious reasons, some large wine companies choose to buy individual winemakers, rather than promote them—but when the eyes of the world are on New World winemakers, and the flying Australian winemakers are raising the consciousness in the Northern Hemisphere of the skills and the styles of the Australian winemaker, why not utilise their image as a marketing tool?

Such an approach may be similar to that applied with the cutting-edge chefs, whose faces and philosophies are recognised and appreciated throughout this country and beyond—not because they choose that path, but because they make great images and copy. I have never understood why the winemaker does not have a more clearly defined image, and why your industry continues to be coy about them. A nd while I do not think that anyone would argue that, as the Italians say, 'il buono vino e fatta nella vigna' (a good wine is made in the vineyard), the image of the viticulturist/vineyard manager is not as marketable as that of the winemaker!

In the Mediterranean, I believe, there is a perception that their winemakers need to confront their New World competitors in the New World competition. In Greece, for example, Domaine Carras imported French oenology guru Emile Peynaud who planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc and filled their cellars with French oak. The French influence is quite pervasive, with increasingly more oenologists trained in Bordeaux, although conversely I read that the emerging wine culture in Greece might be well compared to that of Australia, as Greek winemakers are breaking with hidebound winemaking traditions and adopting innovative ideas for both making and selling wine.

Moves are afoot to employ more flying Australian winemakers and to send Greek oenologists here to learn how to grow quality fruit in the heat. While Greek wine companies do not have a good track record as efficient marketers, and quality control may be an issue (one that I am sure would be addressed should their industry snare the services of an Australian flying winemaker), such a strategy would give them the advantage of being able to note on the back label (as the Eastern Europeans are doing in the UK market): 'M ade in the Australian style by Australian winemakers.'

There is evidence of confident winemaking, flair and imagination. A gain, I cite Domaine Carras as an example. This producer has invested heavily in technology and oak. A reputation must be established for red wines, and the boutique wineries are leading the way. Larger cooperatives are producing fresh, inexpensive, aromatic wines like Kourtakis Cretan Country Red, which recently won a British Masters of Wine Certificate of Excellence and retails in London at £2.99.

In Macedonia, the European Union has partially financed a 'W ine Road', to lead the wine tourist through some breathtaking cultural and historical scenery amongst the vineyards and the wineries. This is an endeavour to boost regional awareness, and to provide the winemaker with the opportunity to confront his/her consumers face to face, and to learn firsthand what they think of the wine and what they are looking for. These tourists are a crucial audience from Europe and beyond, who are tasting wine with food—an audience the Greeks need to reach and convert if their wines are not to remain only for domestic consumption.

There are more than ten wine producing countries in the Mediterranean. Generally, their wines present no threat to Australia, but they are working to adopt modern methods to halt a flood of mediocrity—and working to market the sea of wine that exists, and grows.

Australia is perceived as one of the most grown-up wine consuming countries in the world, and is targeted as such by wine-producing countries around the world. The English, who were brainwashed by conservative wine writers, are generally still conservative wine drinkers. However, this is changing as their menus are influenced by the Mediterranean, and include food cooked by a battalion of modern, young Australian chefs, in the huge restaurants of London. Examples include Conran's gastrodome and Anthony Worrall Thompson's stable. Both these men are Australian, and they are increasing their food and wine lists and placing Australian wines on their wine lists.

English wine writers are coming here in droves, and their attitudes are changing rapidly. Enlightened Australians are of the view that wine and wine food. As Dr Greg Storey, our consul in Nagoya, are bringing brigades of Japanese chefs to Australia to see how we handle our produce and marry it with wine, so it is not all one way traffic. There is a huge potential to market wine to Asian countries who do not have wine industries and yet are targeted by olive oil producers in the Mediterranean as potential markets and will adopt Mediterranean food styles. If we are smart, we can piggy-back on their food style changes and reap the benefits of that marketing.

In summary, some Mediterranean winemakers are in competition with producers from the New World. There is an erroneous perception on the world market that New World wines are always made from the same grapes (such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay), and always follow a
To compete, we need to foster the fledgling Australian made Mediterranean varietals and produce more, not from 'vegetable garden' vineyards (with a bit of this and a bit of that), but from varieties such as Sangiovese or Barbera (the versatile grape of Piedmont that thrives on difficult terrain) to produce wine styles to complement the food we are now eating.

If we are going to adopt Mediterranean wine styles, they need to be well made and appropriate, not simply a beverage made with a Mediterranean variety, or buried anonymously in a commercial blend.

To sell those wines here requires a new marketing thrust. What will change—the wine or the consumer? The consumer has changed, as have our wine styles. The consumer is better educated, more worldly, better travelled, and understands regionality and respects authenticity. More and more, he/she seeks individuality and character in wine. It isn't news that the consumer is seeking better wines at better prices. They are focused on style and real quality at all price levels.

We may see a division between those who seek beverage wines for social drinking and those who demand food-friendly wine to accompany the Mediterranean foods that permeate our lifestyle. The bottom line is that the emerging Australian wine consumer is increasingly expert, and to meet this market and stop the flow of imported Mediterranean wines, our wine-makers must address the most basic principle of marketing: identify what the customers want and give it to them.

There is a European wine lake, and it is predictable that Europe will move away from ordinary bulk wine toward smaller vineyard producers. This will result in more competition in our domestic market. Traditional eating patterns and habits are also changing in the Mediterranean. Wine consumption is declining as more fast food is consumed away from the table. The traditional Mediterranean diet is in decline, which will result in more wine for sale here.

Perhaps Australian winemakers need a foot in both camps—continue to make serious cellaring wines to be 'in there and talked about'—but also, increase the production of Mediterranean styles: food-friendly, palate cleansing, easy to drink savoury varietals, lighter in body, higher in acidity, with lower alcohol levels. Wines that will not overpower food flavours but marry with them.

But hasten slowly! Lock up your winemakers and throw away their passports. Rumour has it as many as 300 worked in the Northern Hemisphere vintage this year; 40 in Spain alone. Rethink your marketing and encompass food and lifestyle—do not just advertise the bottle. A void boring, turgid wine descriptions that few bother to read—rather, use images and words which make your product appealing to a broader base—seduce the consumer. Solicit the help of the cutting-edge chefs with wine and food matches. More wine is being drunk at the table, with food, rather than as a beverage without food—heightening interest in food wines such as those from the Mediterranean.

Lastly, I'd pay close attention to wine lists like those compiled by Bill Marchetti, Amando Percuoco of Buon Ricordo, Anne Taylor at Taylors, and Steve Manfredi from Restaurant Manfredi and The Vine. All of these were favoured in this year's Tucker's Wine List of the Year Award, and all feature Italian wine.

The message is there: the market needs to be met. If you don't start to do it—the Mediterraneans will do it for you!