Mourvedre: Reinventing the Future

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Introduction
It seems ironic that this paper is a discussion of a variety that was almost totally unwanted as little as four years ago. In the 1980s varieties such as Mourvedre, specifically when grown without a highly technical trellis system, had absolutely no future in the Barossa or the general Australian wine industry.

Len Evans passed the following comments about Mourvedre (then referred to as Mataro) in his 1976 Austraian Complete Book of Wine: ‘Some winemakers have used it to good effect in blends with Shiraz, but overall performance of Mataro in Australia only rates it as average in quality. The wines are of neutral flavour and usually possess a rather hard finish. Nevertheless the area of young vines is more than sufficient to maintain the existing areas and it must continue, therefore to hold appeal to some vignerons. It is used for both table wines and ports’ (p176). Further, A. ntcilf (1979) stated that ‘Mataro alone gives wines which are rather neutral in flavour and can be very astringent. Possibly for this reason the variety has not been very highly regarded in Australia’ (p45).

This paper aims to show that the variety has come a long way in less than 20 years.

Previous viticulture and use for fruit
Veritas Wines has two sources of Mourvedre from its own vineyards. The first (hereafter referred to as the ‘old Mourvedre’) is a vineyard of very old basket pruned vines grown without a trellis on a sandy soil. It is suspected that this soil may have originally been of a sandy loam nature, but regular ploughing over many years has degraded the soil structure.

The age of the vines is uncertain, but they are assumed to have been planted around the turn of the century, if not before. This belief is derived from information provided by neighbours: the neighbour to the east is now in his mid seventies, and states they have been there all his life. His grandfather was involved in the working of this vineyard, for a Mr Stelzer who owned the land from the late 1870s until the 1930s. Mr Stelzer’s daughter, who is now in her eighties, remembers the vineyard being there in her youth, as there is a pleasant area nearby where the family used to have picnics—she was obviously never involved in the harvest.

The vine spacing in the vineyard is 3.3 × 3.3 m. The vines are trained in a spur pruned method, with two extra canes. The number of buds retained at pruning is 30–45 per vine. There are very few ‘misses’ in the vineyard, which suggests good horse and latterly tractor skills in performing dodge ploughing for weed control. The vineyard is unirrigated.

Our second vineyard (hereafter referred to as the ‘1972 Mourvedre’) was planted in 1972 on a sandy loam to a black clay soil, with cuttings from the first vineyard. It was established with the traditional 3.3 × 4 m spacing. The vines are trained on a single wire at 1.2 m, and are hand pruned to 40–75 buds. The vines are generally strong, but do not show extreme vigour due to the low number of buds retained. They are supplied with irrigation in the growing season via 4 L/h drippers. Due to a somewhat limited water source they receive 25–40 mm of water per vine from late December to late February.

There is a large difference in the time at which the vines on the two sites pass through phenological stages. Bud burst is much earlier in the 1972 Mourvedre. The old vines generally achieve full budburst by the second week of October, which makes them perhaps the latest on the valley floor. The old Mourvedre vines reach flowering, full set and maturity three to four weeks later than the younger vineyard. Figure 1 shows the harvest date for each vineyard over several recent vintages.

Triggers for change: the market, and opportunities for increased returns
Veritas produced a full bodied dry red wine called Bull’s Blood for many years, named because of the Hungarian origin of the family—Bull’s Blood is a well known wine in Hungary. The wine was always based on full bodied Shiraz with a percentage of either Mourvedre or Cabernet Sauvignon.

The first change in the approach to promoting Mourvedre was made in 1985, when, more by accident than good design, a wine was blended of 50% Shiraz and 50% Mourvedre. This was aged in shaven oak puncheons and bottled at 15 months of age. The initial response to the wine from the market was good, with a older wine drinker apparently recognising the wine, labelled Shiraz/Mourvedre. Novice wine drinkers were not totally overawed by the varietal mix.

It was apparent in the 1986 vintage that the grapes from the old vineyard had a unique character worth investigating. Prior to this vintage, most of the fruit had been made into fortified wine, with a small proportion into dry red. In 1986 some of the free run and pressings were blended, and just a small volume of pressings were kept separate, to see how they evolved. The beautiful herbal, exotic spice aromas and flavours that were present were stunning.

In 1990 the Bull’s Blood was labelled with the varieties clearly stated; until then it had always been sold as a brand.

In 1991 the author teamed with two friends, Chris Ringland and Russell Johnstone, to make a wine called R.B.J Theologicum, which came about from our habit of spending too much money on wines of the Rhône valley in France. (Theologicum was taken from an old French religious term, where it was used to describe the best wine of the vintage. It

![Figure 1. Harvest date for the fruit from the two Veritas Mourvedre vineyards over recent vintages.](image)
is the wine that the saints deserved and the sinners needed. The wine is a Mourvedre/Grenache blend, and has achieved something of a niche following in the Adelaide market. A small portion of our first production was exported to England, where it received strong reviews. By blending these two varieties we have combined Mourvedre (the sinner) with Grenache (the saint).

In 1992 an independent English wine merchant approached Veritas to buy Mourvedre-based wines. A selection was dispatched and was followed by an immediate request for ‘a lot more next year, please’. Thus, I believe that the English wine market has helped in the revival of Mourvedre. The rise of Grenache has also helped these Rhône-based varieties to achieve stardom.

Mourvedre has provided Veritas with an opportunity to make very good wines, and has also provided good returns on an old, low yielding vineyard. The Shiraz/Mourvedre Pressings and Bull’s Blood blend sell for $17.00 per bottle at cellar door. The open market price for Mourvedre in the Barossa Valley will approach $1,000 or more/t in 1996. The resultant wine must be sold for at least $14.00 retail to give an adequate return, which places it well above the average price of bottled red wine.

### Style objectives for new end use

Veritas is now well-positioned, making two distinctively different wines from Mourvedre. The characteristics of the vineyards have been assessed over many years, and the current end use is considered just right.

#### 1972 Mourvedre

Guidance was initially sought from the first purchaser of this wine, the English merchant. His broad suggestions were to make a wine with rich colour, ‘bouncy fruit’, good mouth filling flavour, elegant but not overpowering tannins, not too much oak character, and most importantly: ‘as Australian as possible’.

Trial blends conducted with him showed that, from our sources, a blend of about 65% Mourvedre and 35% Grenache seemed to be ideal.

The next decision was at what age to blend and bottle the wine. It was felt that to retain and show as much fruit as possible it would be positive to bottle the wines just prior to the next vintage.

The above-mentioned style appears to be a good formula. The wine is always dispatched to the United Kingdom in June or July, and sells out by Christmas. Press reviews sent back to Veritas make strong mention of the excellent fruit flavour, and the enjoyment in drinking a wine of such extraordinary finesse and weight.

The wines have all aged well. As with the R.B.J, all of the wines to four years of age still exhibit good fruit and have excellent mouth-feel.

#### Old Mourvedre

Rather than producing a wine for consumption in its youth, this fruit is used for this wine for its ageing potential. To achieve this potential, a very good full-bodied Shiraz is selected as the base. The Mourvedre has very strong spice flavours, which seem to be reduced when blended. The aim is to produce a wine with excellent fruit, but to make sure the bridge between fruit and tannins is in harmony. The wine has been a consistent medal winner since the 1990 vintage, with the 1994 being awarded a gold medal at the Rutherglen Wine Show.

It is intended that a varietal Mourvedre will be made. To this end, for the past three years Veritas has bottled a small amount of varietal Mourvedre of every style made, for evaluation. These wines will be assessed up to four years of age. Results so far show that the varietal wines are retaining strong fruit characters, and not developing the hard or astringent characters previously reported.

### Viticultural and oenological techniques

Not much has changed in the production methods in the two vineyards. The intention has always been to make every wine the best possible, but recently the emphasis has been to show as much of the true varietal nature of each vineyard. To this end, the harvest date, ripeness and style of the wine have been varied, to allow greater flexibility in blending.

#### 1972 Mourvedre

There is great attention paid to the water regime of the vines. The fruit ripens mid–late season, and so the importance of the total growth cycle and the ability of the vines to ripen the fruit is critical. The objective is to produce a wine with strong aroma, and full but not overpowering tannins.

Two selections are made from the vineyard at harvest. The first fruit is generally picked from vines grown on a variable soil of heavy black baysic to sandy loam. The second is from sandy loam.

Harvest commences at approximately 13°Bé (see Figure 2). The harvest criteria include the sugar level, as well as the taste and visual observation of the grapes. The fruit is crushed with an old Whitehill crusher, and fermented in open fermenters with heading-down boards. The yeast strain is selected according to the sugar content of the must, and fermentation proceeds at a maximum of 25–28°C.

The juice is drawn off the skins at 2–4°Bé, and the pressings are blended back into the free-run wine. The wine is racked twice then placed in old wood for maturation. Malolactic fermentation (MLF) occurs in the barrel, after which sulfur dioxide (SO₂) is added. Tartaric acid may also be added if required.

This wine is always blended with Grenache for sale in the United Kingdom. The blending process ensures that the wine is elegant and full flavoured, but not overpowering, and can be enjoyed at an early age.

#### Old Vine Mourvedre

Veritas is extremely fortunate to have this vineyard, as the wine it produces is special, and will become part of Australia’s

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**Figure 2.** Grape ripeness at harvest from the two Veritas Mourvedre vineyards over recent vintages.
winemaking heritage. The aim is to make a big, mouth-filling wine with long strong flavours, but without aggressive hard tannins.

The critical factor in the success of the vineyard and ultimate quality of the wine is the pruning level: the number of buds retained. The vines are pruned so as to achieve the optimum open canopy with correct shoot growth and crop level (Figure 3); however, the exact levels for each and the individual between them is unknown. Despite this, the resultant product is considered to be of very high quality.

The old vine Mourvedre is always the last fruit picked, and the hand picking team takes 3–5 days to crawl around on their knees and pick all of the fruit. The harvest criteria are slightly different for this vineyard, and the ideal harvest point is approximately 14° Bé (Figure 2).

The process of vinification is described above, with the exception that the weather is generally cooler and the resultant fermentation temperature also cooler and takes longer. The yeast strain is again chosen according to the sugar content of the must. A small portion of the pressings is kept separate. The wine is always much more intense in aroma, flavour and colour than the wine from the 1972 vines. The tannins are longer and stronger, and the wine shows greater mouthfeel.

The wine is aged in 2–3 year old oak barrels, some of which are shaven and lightly toasted. Generally, 70% of the barrels are coopered from French oak, and 30% from American oak. The ageing period is 22 months, and the wine is always blended with Shiraz to produce the Shiraz/Mourvedre Pressings.

A review of the market
Veritas has produced a blended wine with some proportion of Mourvedre since 1967. This wine has now achieved a dedicated following among the regular customers, some of whom occasionally write to the winery, singing the praises of, say, the 1972 or the 1977. This indicates that a full bodied wine of quality is made from this variety— it has good ageing potential.

In the last three years the interest in wines from traditional varieties grown in the Barossa Valley has grown. The important contributing factor is that the wines are generally from mature vines which are low yielding (Figure 3). In the case of Mourvedre, the popularity of the wines is restricted by the small quantity grown in Australia. Table 1 shows the recent predictions of grape requirements for Mourvedre in the Barossa, which suggest that there is strong demand for Mourvedre in the Barossa.

During the disastrous vine pull scheme, many old vineyards—including Mourvedre—were sent up in smoke. This scheme resulted in much of the decrease in area of Mourvedre from the 651 ha bearing in 1976–77, which produced 2,166 t. Those vineyards which still exist in the Barossa Valley are probably small, old and unirrigated. These characteristics suggest that the future for Mourvedre is positive, as they are considered important to good quality fruit.

There are several companies in the Barossa which currently produce wines with varying portions of Mourvedre, and many consider the wines to be ‘flagships’ which command a good price. It can only be assumed that the demand for the variety will exceed supply, as it appears that very little, if any, Mourvedre has been planted in the last few years. The best available estimate the author can make is that 10 ha were planted in the 1995 growing season.

Conclusion
It is believed that there is a strong future for so called ‘different’ varieties, because the people who make them are passionate about them, and will not produce mediocre wines. This commitment to quality ensures that these wines are bottled for all to enjoy.

If anyone is thinking of planting Mourvedre, do so—but please ensure that your grand- and great-grand-children bear the fruit of your labour—they will marvel at your foresight!

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References