Marsanne

NEIL LARSON
Chateau Tahbilk

Background
Marsanne is widely planted in the Rhône Valley in France, and is used to make some of the great White Hermitages, mostly on its own, but sometimes with some Roussanne. Robert Parker tasted a 1929 Chapoutier White Hermitage at 56 years of age, and declared it ‘one of the greatest white wines I have ever tasted’, giving it a score of 96/100.

Style
The Chateau Tahbilk Marsanne style wine is unwooded and shows the primary expression of the fruit. The wine exhibits tropical and citrus fruit flavours in the peach/banana and lemon/lime spectrum when young and these develop into toasty honeysuckle with bottle age. The palate is crisp and fresh with rich fruit flavour and balanced acid, and is essentially dry. Marsanne has a medium term ageing potential with the best vintages continuing to develop past 10 years.

Viticulture
Location
Chateau Tahbilk is situated 7 km from Nagambie in the Goulburn Valley in Central Victoria. The vineyards are grouped along the banks of the Goulburn River and an anabranch of it which flows through the property. The Nagambie district is a Vine Disease District due to phylloxera.

Climate
The MJT is probably slightly less than the 21.2°C measured at nearby Mangalore Airport due to the influences of the water masses of the river and anabranch. Rainfall is approximately 600 mm, the wettest months being June, July and August, and the driest December, January and February. The sites are at approximately 134 m elevation, on both gently undulating and flat terrain.

Vineyards
The estate has Marsanne vineyards dating from the 1920s through to the 1990s, with a variety of source material, aspects, soils and trellis design (Table 1).

Source material for the older blocks is unknown and from ampelographic inspection the material is quite varied. These blocks are typical of many older vineyards in that there is a mixture of material, but a mixture of varieties as well. The blocks planted prior to 1986 are on ARG rootstocks and are in very good health. They are on 7' × 10' (2.1 × 3.0 m) spacing, with a single wire trellis (originally at 0.9 m, this winter moved up to 1.2 m), a mixture of head and cordon training, and are all cane pruned. Hand picking is necessary to avoid mechanical damage from the harvester.

The younger vineyards are on a range of rootstocks with the source material from the Cellar block, which was originally sourced from the MIA. These vines are at 1.8 × 3.0 m spacing on a vertically shoot positioned trellis with the fruiting wire at 1.2 m, and a pair of movable foliage wires. These are manually lifted to 1.3 and 1.7 m. A pair of wires at 0.8 m is used to arch two canes on each side of the head to counter dominance of the apical buds. The vines are cane pruned and machine harvested. Vines are trimmed toward the end of December as required.

A plentiful supply of water (the Goulburn River) and generally dry summers enable manipulation of soil moisture which is monitored by gypsum blocks and neutron probes. All existing Marsanne vineyards are irrigated by travelling irrigator and receive less than 150 mm in an average year. Future plantings will be drip irrigated with microprocessor control.

We have found Marsanne planted in fertile soils on rootstocks is quite vigorous and produces a thick heavy canopy, so it is essential to have a good spray program, with the main disease pressure being from botrytis, powdery mildew or downy mildew. Some of our blocks have suffered from phomopsis, so careful selection of source material in future will be essential. Bunches are medium in size, quite compact, with small berries.

Typical phenological dates
Budburst: Late September–early October
Flowering: Mid November
Set: Late November–early December
Veraison: Early February
The Gugger's Block is usually 7–10 days later than the other blocks, which are about two weeks later than our chardonnay.
Harvest: Mid March to early April.

Oenology
Chateau Tahbilk Marsanne winemaking is very straightforward, using reductive processing, cool fermentation, and early bottling. Standard additions at the crusher are PMS at 120 g/T, 90 g/T ascorbic acid, equivalent 2–3 g/L tartaric acid and 20 ml/L Pectinex Ultra enzyme. The fruit is crushed, then pumped via must cooler at 5–10°C to membrane presses. Typical extraction rates are 600 L/T free run, and 100 L/T pressings (up to 1.2 Bar) which are usually kept separate. The juice is cold settled at 0–3°C for 5 to 7 days, then the tops racked without filtration and the bottoms RDV filtered. A cid is adjusted to 8 g/L, 200 mg/L DAP added and then the ferment proceeds at 0.5°C per day at 10–14°C with EC 1118. A 0.5°C bentonite is added, and the ferment stopped at 3–4 g/L residual sugar. MLF and oak maturation are not part of our style. The wine is cold stabilised by the contact process, medium earth filtered, blended and bottled.

Marketing
The wine is marketed in a clear punted Chablis bottle in 750 ml and, in limited quantities, in French Green Burgundy magnums. It is labelled Marsanne, with ‘unwooded’ in small print underneath the variety. This has been added at the
Marsanne is a variety which consumers continue to discover. It is successful for us because it is a niche variety (i.e. not Chardonnay), approachable and easy to drink, with a mixture of tropical/citrus fruit which is not too dry, retailing at the $10 to $12 price point domestically. Similar success with export markets is the result of the same factors.

Distribution is by agents, cellar door and mailing list. We consider the future of Marsanne as a niche variety will continue to be bright, with current demand in excess of production.

Roussanne

We have limited experience with Roussanne at Tahbilk as the block has only yielded since 1993. So far our experience has been that the vines tend to overcrop and that the fruit ripens very late. It is usually picked after the Cabernet. Now that the vines are mature we plan to reduce yields through pruning and irrigation management, with the aim of improving fruit flavour and intensity.

Phenological dates tend to be similar or slightly later than our Gugger’s Marsanne block. However, the Roussanne is currently flowering whereas the Gugger’s is yet to flower.

We have blended the finished wine with Marsanne on all vintages to date except for 1993 when we considered it good enough to bottle separately. This wine was released under the Dalfarras label and was lightly wooded, with citrus and tropical fruit, but had only short-term cellaring potential. We have reserved our judgment on this variety until we have conducted some vineyard trials and have more experience with it.

### Marsanne

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acres (ha)</th>
<th>Planted</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Scion</th>
<th>Rootstock</th>
<th>Trellis</th>
<th>Spacing</th>
<th>Soils</th>
<th>Yield T/ac</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madill’s</td>
<td>16.64</td>
<td>6.74</td>
<td>1927</td>
<td>ARG</td>
<td>Single wire</td>
<td>7 x 10’</td>
<td>Yellow/grey loam</td>
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<td>5.35</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>ARG</td>
<td>Single wire</td>
<td>7 x 10’</td>
<td>Red fine sand</td>
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<td>Cellar</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1980–5</td>
<td>ex MIA</td>
<td>Single wire</td>
<td>7 x 10’</td>
<td>Heavy grey loam</td>
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<td>Rothergill</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1986–8</td>
<td>ex Cellar</td>
<td>Kober SB</td>
<td>VSP</td>
<td>Grey/brown loam</td>
<td>3.5–7.0</td>
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<td>Gugger’s</td>
<td>30.29</td>
<td>12.26</td>
<td>1988</td>
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<td>10.05</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>ex Cellar</td>
<td>SBB, 5C</td>
<td>VSP</td>
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<td>Not yet fully yielding</td>
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<td>Hendy</td>
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<td>4.05</td>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>&amp; 99 Richter</td>
<td>VSP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roussanne</td>
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<td>1.33</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>IC74 8289</td>
<td>Schwarzmann</td>
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