



Left page and bottom right: Vintage bottle photos courtesy of **Kay Brothers Amery** and **d'Arenberg**. Across the region Dry Red, Burgundy and Port (Tawny) were in the main grenache based. Top: High sands grenache at Yangarra planted in 1946. Photo by **Milton Wordley**.

Making grenache great again

Story by **Corrina Wright**.

The recent release of the 2020 wine data for our McLaren Vale region contained a big surprise. Now, I'm guessing that reviewing the SA Winegrape Crush Survey 2020 Regional Summary Report may not be high up on your summer reading list, so I'll break it down for you. For the first time in my living memory, the average price for a tonne of McLaren Vale grenache grapes was higher than the average price for a tonne of McLaren Vale shiraz.

Mic drop. This got me thinking: when was the last time, if ever, that the ubiquitous shiraz played second fiddle to grenache? To answer this and more, I decided to go on a journey into the history books to tell the almost two hundred year old story of grenache in our beautiful region.

Grenache's story, it turns out, is very much tied to the changing palates of the local, national and international wine drinker from the very beginning of the Australian wine industry. Grenache made its way to Australia via Captain Arthur Phillip in 1788 on the first fleet. The origins of the variety can be traced back to northern Spain in the twelfth century, where it's called 'garnacha'. From there, the variety spread, establishing strong connections to regions under Spanish rule at the time: Sardinia, where it's called 'cannonau', as well as the southern Rhone and Languedoc regions of France.

Fast forward to 1836, and on the other side of the world, South Australia was being colonised by white settlers. Cuttings had made their way into the hands of settlers like John Reynell, Thomas Hardy and Dr AC Kelly. Their names are now synonymous with the very beginnings of the wine community on the Fleurieu Peninsula. Grenache was particularly popular with early vigneron for its ability to crop at high volumes while still achieving adequate sugar (and therefore alcohol) levels, and for its hardy nature in our dry climate. By 1862, South Australian *Advertiser* wine correspondent Ebenezer Ward reported that grenache was '... thriving better than any other kind.'

It seemed this variety had found a new Mediterranean-esque clime to call home. The glory days of grenache continued for the next 100 years, championed in the early days by the British who had quite a

thirst for colonial wines. Grenache provided plenty of litres per vine as well as the higher alcohol levels required for a wine to endure the long boat trip to Old Blighty.

At the turn of the century, consumer tastes changed. There was a yearning for sweeter fortified wines and, as luck would have it, grenache fit the bill. In the mid-1920s the UK was so desperate for the good stuff they offered a bounty on wines above 34% alcohol that almost doubled the price of bulk wine for the makers. Understandably, the love affair with grenache for both the grower and winemaker continued, making it the most planted variety in McLaren Vale until well into the 1960s.

Then, in the early '70s, things took a turn. Buoyed by the influx of European migrants following the Second World War, particularly from Italy, the Australian consumer started to demand red table >



*Top: Our inland sandy, dry land seems to be a recipe for good grenache grape growing. Photo courtesy of **Yangarra Estate**. Bottom: Taking grenache grapes to the winery 1943. Photo courtesy of **Oliver's Taranga**.*

wines. Grenache suffered significantly during this time, for all the reasons that it was so loved previously. Its history as a 'bulk' grape variety suitable only for fortified production or as a blender became frowned upon. Its lack of natural colour (wine nerd alert: grenache and pinot noir are examples of varieties that have less anthocyanin, or colour pigment, than other varieties like shiraz or cabernet sauvignon) and the fact it had been grown for quantity rather than quality for so long, resulted in a lingering belief that grenache was inferior for red table wine production.

The number of hectares of grenache in the region started to take a dive as growers and winemakers adjusted to this new normal. The decline was further exacerbated by the federal government's 'vine-pull' scheme of 1986. In the midst of a global grape glut, the great minds of the government at the time decided to pay growers to pull out vines. Guess which variety bore the brunt? Grenache. In particular, old vine grenache. We lost 310 hectares in total, reducing plantings in the region by a quarter in just one year. Shiraz and cabernet sauvignon ascended the throne.

We were lucky that we did have some stalwart supporters of grenache in the region, so not all was lost. D'Arenberg was one of the local wineries to take advantage of the boom in red table wines, craftily blending grenache and shiraz into their famous red stripe 'burgundy' flagons, one of the most popular wines in the country for

many years. But prices for grenache grapes fell drastically, making it unprofitable for many growers, resulting in further destruction of old vines.

Now the tides are turning once more. Consumer tastes are moving ever-so-slightly away from more full-bodied red wines and are embracing lighter wines. Growers who were lucky enough to hold onto their grenache vines through all the upheaval, are now the custodians of greatness. They also find themselves in hot demand. Winemaker Steve Pannell predicted there would be a 'battle for vineyards', especially in the Blewitt Springs district and any remaining bush vines. Some are now more than one hundred years old, often dry-grown and no longer producing huge volumes, but the quality of the fruit speaks for itself. As this goes to print, Chalk Hill's 2019 Alpha Crucis Old Vine Grenache won the best wine in the 2020 McLaren Vale Wine Show.

Truth be told, the revelations of the SA Winegrape Crush Survey 2020 weren't really that big of a surprise to those of us in the local wine community. We were wondering how long it would take before our little local secret would be the envy of the wine world, and would catapult grenache to its rightful place on the throne. As famed wine writer James Halliday has said, 'McLaren Vale Grenache is its secret weapon, not merely Australia's best, but every bit as good as that of the Rhone Valley.' Grenache is great again. 