

Alex's Newsletter

#27 April 2009



Rose Bay Drive In Liquor

Felton Road Riesling

The region: Central Otago (NZ)

The alcohol: 9.5%

The taste: Delicate citrus flavours

The price: \$40 or 10% off in a dozen



Felton Road is one NZ's best wineries, based down in Central Otago, the friggin' freezin' region in the South.

They're mostly known for their Pinots. All of them are outstanding but the Block 3 and Block 5 are some of the best Pinot Noirs I've ever tasted. And I've been fortunate enough to taste some of the best around.

Unfortunately the Pinots are really really hard to get. We get a miniscule amount every year and they sell out in a heartbeat.

But their whites are absolutely killer wines too. They make three Rieslings, the Block 1 (impossible to get), the Dry Riesling and this one, which is an off-dry wine (not sweet, but not bone dry).

They all get killer reviews, but this is my favourite of the lot. It's just such a delicate structure and the little bit of residual sugar mixes well with the citrus flavours to really get your mouth watering. There's a nice crisp acidity there and the alcohol is lower than many whites, because there's leftover sugar that wasn't fermented into alcohol. It's a belter and one that you should try.

If you're not a fan of the off-dry style, keep an eye out for the Dry Riesling. The alcohol is a bit higher and there are more floral characteristics than the off-dry wine. It's a bolder style with a bit more weight with a long, dry finish.

Now, if I can actually convince any of you to try Riesling (it's harder than you'd think!), I'll be interested to hear what you think about it.

Actually, I already know you'll love it, I just want to hear it from you.

How do your expectations influence your flavour perception?

One of the things that I research is how your expectations of food or drink change your perception of the taste or smell of that substance. At the end of the day, expectations have a huge effect (known as top-down influences).

A simple way of looking at this is using colour. I did a demonstration today where I gave some year 11 kids two solutions to identify. One was yellow and one was blue. Both had the same lemon smell in them. Almost all of them correctly identified the yellow solution, but only about half of them got the blue one, even though they smelled identical.

Appearances can change your liking too. Does anyone remember the Green Tomato Sauce brought out by Heinz? It had exactly the same flavour profile as the regular tomato sauce, but was coloured green for fun. When tested on people who were wearing a mask and couldn't see the colour, they liked it just as much as the red stuff... in fact, they thought it was normal tomato sauce. But the people who were looking at it hated it, said it didn't taste like tomato and refused to buy it. They're both getting the same flavours, but the group who could see the green colouring freaked out and expected something weird, even though they were told it was tomato sauce.

The same sort of thing happens with wine. Colour of a wine can trick people. If you give someone two glasses, both with Sauv Blanc but one coloured pink using food colouring,

they'll rate the pink one as sweeter... just in case you needed another drinking game... because they'll expect a rosé and most people expect rosé to be sweet.

Same thing happens with wine labels and types. Most people have expectations when it comes to wine. For example, many people don't like Chardonnay so when you give them a Chardy, they'll expect to hate it. However, pour them a Chardonnay without telling them what it is and they're more likely to like it, particularly if it's an unoaked Chardonnay.

Similar things happen with labels. I served a lady the other day who told me she was sure she would hate a wine because she didn't like the look of the label.

I've had a bit of fun with a certain well-known Sauv Blanc. When I serve it blind to people (that is, they can't see the label), they're not a huge fan and point out all sorts of faults with it. When I give them the same wine later and show them the label, all of a sudden they magically love it!

Don't get me wrong, if you're not a Chardonnay fan, I'm not saying that you should keep going out and trying Chardonnays until you find one you like, that's a waste of money! But I AM saying that it's not a wise move to write them all off. If there's one to try at a tasting, give it a go! Particularly if the winemaker or trained cellar door can explain what the wine is about. You might find something you like... and I often hear that happen.

So, if you want to get a true idea of whether or not you like a wine, close your eyes and drink away. You never know what you'll find.

The “Flying Winemaker”

A winemaker’s primary duties happen during vintage, which is the time when the grapes are picked and crushed. The resulting juice is fermented and put into barrels or stainless steel tanks and later into bottle.

Vintage happens at the end of summer every year, when the grapes have had time to ripen and develop all of the characteristics that the winemaker looks for in a grape, such as sugar levels (using the Baumé scale), acidity, specific flavours, etc.

In many older wine producing countries, such as France, Italy and Spain, the winemakers tend to stick with a certain winery for a long time, often because the winery is owned by the winemaker or their family. To help them out, there are consultants who travel around to offer advice. If you’ve seen Mondovino, you’ll be familiar with the work of Michel Rolland, one of the most prominent (and controversial) winemaking consultants in the world. But at the end of the day, the same winemaker makes wine for that winery every year.

But not all winemakers are like this. Many Australian winemakers work vintage in Australia from February through April and then travel to Northern Hemisphere countries to work vintage at the end of their summer. Our winemakers are particularly well-known for doing this.

There are good things and bad things about this. I think it’s a particularly good thing for winemaking students to do this as it exposes them to a wider variety of winemaking methods, styles, grapes etc than they would see if they

only made wine in Australia. It also gives them twice as much practice, which is highly important for a student of any type.

Many winemakers keep up this practice until they either get married and settle down or they manage to save up enough money to set up their own winery.

More and more new wineries are being set up by younger winemakers, sometimes starting out as a few barrels in their garage. These winemakers often experiment with new and interesting grapes, styles and winemaking techniques. The end result is interesting wines that set themselves apart from the traditionally mainstream styles that we’ve come to know. Some work and some don’t, but at least they’re being innovative rather than making “wine by numbers”, as many traditional producers do, particularly in the old world.

There’s a bit of a downside here. You have less control of the wine once you head off to another winery, such as deciding when it goes into bottle.

Similarly, it’s a bit difficult to develop a track record with a certain winery to keep producing the same styles every year. And many smaller labels rely on flying winemakers to make their wine each year. But, as far as I’m concerned, variety is the spice of life.

The Beast Magazine

Keep an eye out for my articles in the glossy magazine for the East, The Beast. The mag is a fun read and each month I give away a bottle of the wine I review... you just have to answer a simple question. Good luck!

Magpie Estate “The Fakir” Grenache

The region: Barossa Valley (SA)

The alcohol: 14.5%

The taste: Warm, cedary violets

The price: \$20 or 10% off in a dozen



Mailing List

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You will receive 2-3 e-mails per month and can opt out at any time. Join now for the chance to win!

Magpie Estate is a joint venture between Rolf Binder Wines (aka Veritas Winery) and an English wine merchant, Noel Young. Rolf Binder particularly known for the red blends, which are blends of Shiraz, Grenache and Mataro, sometimes referred to as Rhône blends. Noel has a particular fondness for these styles of reds so he hooked up with Rolf to make his own stuff. Noel then has the tough job to hop on a plane and head over to Oz twice a year to taste parcels of wine to work out which wines go where.

A few people confuse the Magpie Estate label with the Laughing Magpie by d’Arenberg or Squawking Magpie wines, but they’re all completely independent from each other.

They make a few wines under the Magpie Estate label, with weird names like “The Sack”, “The Call Bag”, “The Black Sock”, “The Wit and Shanker” and the top shelf “Gomersal” and “Malcolm” wines. I don’t know what they were smoking when they named the wines, but I want some.

The 2005 was a tough vintage for some Grenache so the stuff that would have gone into Gomersal went into this little bargain. There’s a smidge of Shiraz in there too, but it’s mostly Grenache. A fair bit of new oak gives this a cedary nose (think of a cigar box), bits of pepper and touches of cherry. It’s not a jammy style of Grenache and will go with a lot of different styles of food.

It’s also quite warm in your mouth, which is due to the high alcohol content typical of some Barossa reds.

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