

Australian wines might suffer from a bit of an image problem, but boutique wineries are working hand in hand with niche distributors to remedy this situation.

TEXT LEENA NG, SHASHA RENEE AND RADKA SLOVACKOVA

# NICHE APPEAL



FRANC ROCCA AND FAMILY



**IT IS NO SECRET THAT AUSTRALIA'S WINE SCENE IS MONOPOLIZED** by large conglomerates such as Foster's Group, which owns brands such as Lindeman's, Penfolds, Wolf Blass and Rosemount, to US beverage major Constellation, having acquired names such as Banrock Station and Hardy's.

Winemaker Alan Cooper of Cobaw Ridge agrees. "Most of all Australian wine exported is from the same top 20 producers. The numbers look even bleaker when you look at the top five companies. The export data into the United States is sometimes listed as 'including' Yellow Tail or 'excluding' them. It is no wonder Australia has been categorized as producers of cheap bottled sunshine wine."

The success of Yellow Tail wine in worming its way into mainstream consciousness the world over has garnered divided responses. On one hand, it showcases Australia's potential as a serious wine producing

nation churning out wines that are reasonably priced, complete with innovative, approachable labels. The flipside reveals the deprecatory attitude towards such mass labels, which are more often than not considered bulk plonk and commonly associated with 'supermarket' wines. It doesn't help that the oversupply of wines in Australia the past two years have contributed to this bulk wine mentality.

"The ever tightening grip of the big two retail chain outlets, combined with the ever increasing grip of big producers squeezing every last profit point out of the industry but at the exclusion of the smaller producer has lead to a greater division between big and small producers," says Cooper.

Managing Director Franc Rocca of Rocland Estate sees the increasing segmentation as an opportunity for boutique producers to put their own brands out there in the market. "My view is that the large

conglomerates are able to open up markets and create awareness of Australian wine. This opens the door for the smaller boutique producers to enter markets. With the right marketing this can be used as an advantage," he explains.

Beyond being family-owned in most cases, according to Rocca, boutique wineries provide that point of difference as the wines are "not made to recipe", yield low case production and offer that level of personalization. "Consumers like the personal touch and like to try wine from smaller producers because they can relate to the stories behind the wines," he adds. The focus on the regionality of its wines also puts it at an advantage, in putting forth 'world class wines that have a history and a sense of place,' reveals Cooper. When it comes to representing their wines in the market, forming a sustainable relationship with a like-minded importer with a fundamental

understanding of what the winery stands for is of utmost importance.

While many commercial generic wine makers in Australia face a paramount crisis caused by an over production and thus lowering the value as well as appeal to world consumers of Australian wines, Jeffrey Grosset of Grosset Wines has defied the trend as his wines have gained a high and stable reputation. Their fan-base remains strong if not expanding. Indeed, you will find Grosset wines almost anywhere on the world. Great value and outstanding quality rivaling the established Riesling regions attract many conscious consumers in these economically challenging times. In Singapore, Grosset wines can be found at Jones The Grocer.

It is no mean feat to stand out in competitive wine world, especially with Australia being perceived as a hive of inexpensive wines. Grosset says: "The challenge is to ensure that the uniqueness of what we do, how we respect and value the importance of site, and the variety, is understood."

"As we are a family-owned company, it is preferred to run with family-owned smaller distributors as they share the same philosophies of our company and take interest in our stories and ideals. They provide us with a more personalized service for our brands," says Rocca. Wine importer Le Vigne was chosen to represent his wines from Rocland Estate in Singapore.

"Small can be just as successful as big brands," adds Cooper. The owner of Cobaw Ridge decided to work hand in hand with importer Wine Angels in achieving just that. Director Madeleine Tan of Wine Angels says it also makes business sense for niche companies to work with boutique wineries. "I have decided to work with smaller and medium size wineries with unique characteristics in Australia. It also depends on business model and objectives of the company,"



FRANC ROCCA OF ROILAND ESTATE

she explains. Other Australian boutique wineries under her portfolio include Mount Gisborne and SC Pannell. "At the end of the day it really is the small operators that set the trends and forge the new horizons," says Cooper. With both wine producers and distributors striving to close the gap, this niche appeal will draw its own crowd of wine imbibers convinced of the high calibre of wines that can be produced from the land Down Under, choosing quality over quantity as the driving force of their purchase.

**ROCLAND ESTATE, BAROSSA VALLEY**

Helmed by Franc Rocca, the second generation successor handles various roles from overseeing the concepts to communicating with people who work with him. Started 12 years ago, the family-owned wine company has been producing wines with clever labels that set it apart from the rest. From its Chocolate Box range offering consumers the easy anticipation of chocolate in its wines to the more serious Lot 147 Shiraz, his whole approach to wines rides on the element of fun. 'The labels are funny but it is a serious wine that doesn't insult the consumer's palate. Our wines are elegant and well balanced, as we believe our wines should compliment the food but not dominate,' explains Rocca. Other range of wines include the Duck Duck Goose, Ass Kisser and Kilroy Was Here!

**GROSSET WINES, CLARE VALLY**

The "father" of perhaps the most popular Riesling in Australia, Jeffrey Grosset, started his wine journey at a tender age of 15 observing his parents' joy from wine and food. Fascinated by wines he could not wish for anything else for his 16th birthday than a winemaking course. Many years have passed since his first serious encounter with wine and his dedication has bore fruits of success. The multi-award-winning Grosset believes that the "quality, consistency of style and integrity are the strengths" of his Polish Hill Riesling which he has been making for 30 years in Clare Valley.

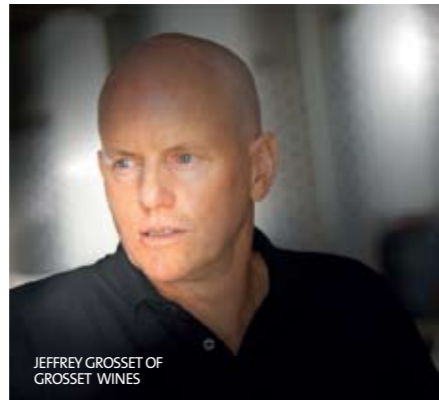
Grosset himself relishes the European dry Rieslings produced by Trimbach Clos Sainte Hune from Alsace, German Breuer from Rheingau or even Prager from Austria. Producing such wines with an impressive long finish and limey mineral taste are not a cheap affair, but Grosset has pulled out the stops for his Polish Hill Riesling.

Sadly he finds many drawbacks in the general production of Australian Riesling, such as a lack of attention to harvest date by vineyard managers to achieve optimum flavour, the "market preference" for other

varieties resulting in winemakers focusing their attention on these rather than Rieslings—thereby sealing the fate of their Riesling before it is even made." On the other hand Grosset is all praise for Australia's "law-free" and unconventional stand on winemaking, as opposed to the strict regulations in Europe, which has enabled innovative and experimental approaches to be adopted to produce outstanding results. He is cautious, however, about adopting new and radical winemaking practices just because they are trendy as these often lead to wines

that lack of finesse and sensitivity.

With regards to *terroir* in Australia, Grosset says, "local Aboriginal communities have had words for this concept for thousands of years," and he himself is devoted to respecting it as years of his own experience in making wines have proved the existence of *terroir* in this land of kangaroos. He is clearly betting on the future of Australian wines. "We're maturing as a wine producing nation, and the best wines are already showing that Australia does have its share of both great sites and great producers," he says.



JEFFREY GROSSET OF GROSSET WINES



POLISH HILL VINEYARD



AERIAL VIEW OF COBAW RIDGE

**COBAW RIDGE, MACEDON RANGES**

Established by Alan and Nelly Cooper, Cobaw Ridge is located on the cusp of the Great Divide in the heart of Macedon Ranges. Certified organic since 2009, the winery prides itself on its range of Chardonnay, Shiraz/ Viognier (Syrah) and the best Lagrein in the country. 'We consider all our wines to fit the "iconic" status. Ranging from gold medals or quoted as the "best of the best" or singled out as producing "the best example" in the country,' says Mr. Cooper. 'The overriding aspect that sets the wines of the Macedon Ranges apart from the rest of the Australian industry is that the general growing conditions are right on the edge for grape growing. It is only when the boundaries of viable viticulture are pushed that greatness is achieved. The resultant wines all have a certain edge to them and always with a strong minerality, a fine but present backbone of natural tannins and acidity and controlled alcohol levels,' he adds. Allowing the *terroir* to express itself is the guiding philosophy of the winery, resulting in wines with fruit purity and clarity with minimal intervention. Grapes are handled by hand and estate-grown and bottled. **wd**



COBAW RIDGE VINEYARD



ALAN AND NELLY COOPER OF COBAW RIDGE