

Australian Sparkling Red – we invented it!

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John Wilson, a fellow Sparkling Red maker from the Clare Valley in South Australia has spent many hours researching the earliest years of the Sparkling Red style. Much of this article is based on his research.

Originally called Sparkling Burgundy, the Australian sparkling wine was nothing like any other of the early French sparkling wines. The French Burgundy wines were possibly made from Pinot Noir or not even red grapes at all. The word “Burgundy” was also used in France to describe Chardonnay and some very light red wines. In Australia, Chardonnay was commonly referred to as “White Burgundy”.

John’s research found the first Australian Sparkling Burgundy was produced in 1881 by the Victorian Champagne Company, established by Melbourne doctor and parliamentarian, Louis Lawrence Smith, who employed the talents of French winemaker Auguste D’Argent. The first commercial attempt it may have been, but it was short lived, as in 1884 the company went into voluntary liquidation and Auguste D’Argent died later in the same year.

In 1888, a French winemaker Edmund Mazure was employed to manage the Auldana vineyard in the Adelaide foothills. Edmund had spent a few years previously in French and Spanish wineries, coming to Australia via the Dutch East Indies. The Auldana vineyard grew mainly Shiraz grapes. John Wilson suggests, and I would agree, that there is little doubt that Edmund Mazure used some of these Shiraz grapes to make Sparkling wine and deserves the honour of being the creator of the Australian Sparkling Burgundy. Mazure went on to start his own sparkling wine cellars, which was eventually named “Romalo”

By 1894 the Great Western winery, in the western part of the state of Victoria, had made Sparkling Burgundy under their winemaker Hans Irvine, and had exhibited the wine in the Royal Agricultural Society’s Melbourne Wine Show.

Anecdotal evidence suggests Australian Sparkling Burgundy dropped in demand during the late 1930s and ‘40s, with a resurgence in the 1950s. The Cold Duck era from 1971 to 1975 was not a good time for Australian Sparkling Burgundy. The idea for the Cold Duck fad was brought here from the USA. Within a short time, various concoctions of sweet, thin red wines, lightly or heavily carbonated hit the market. The prices became cheaper and cheaper, dragging down the sales of genuine Australian Sparkling Burgundy to a point where sales stopped dead.

During this time I was at Roseworthy College doing Agriculture and then Oenology, graduating in 1973. I spent many hours during these Roseworthy years drinking 10-year-old Romalo Sparkling Burgundy (at \$2 per bottle) with my fellow student Malcolm Ray. Little did I know I would be part of a huge resurgence in Australian Sparkling Red.

THE MIDDLE TO LATER YEARS

By 1981, I was stretching my abilities and had started making trial batches of Sparkling Red from Coonawarra Shiraz. The early experimental tirages were stirred in a 200L drum and filled into bottles by hand. I started making my Sparkling Shiraz by the “Méthode Champenoise” (MC) and to this day I still use this intensive, time-consuming method. The method involves secondary fermentation, ageing, and subsequent disgorgement all from the one bottle, thereby giving superior finished wines.

During the late 1980s, a few Sparkling Reds emerged. Seppelts had enough tirage stocks to release Great Western Sparkling Burgundy, Rockford released Black Shiraz in 1987, and Morris Shiraz Durif was on sale.

Gradually through the 1990s the popularity of Sparkling Reds grew, first in Adelaide (my home town), then Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Sydney.

In 1994 I changed the name “Sparkling Burgundy” to Sparkling Shiraz. This was a time when the French winemakers were demanding names like Champagne, Chablis and Burgundy not be used as descriptive words for wine-styles in Australia. I was very happy to oblige the French, considering that the sooner I (and Australia) developed alternatives which were truly Australian, the better. This could not have been more relevant to a wine that could be truly called one of Australia’s unique wines.

THE NOW

There are approximately 60 different Sparkling Red wines on the market in Australia. These represent a total Australian production of some 350,000 dozen (my estimate). Many of the producers are small makers (less than 250 dozen) with the main volume, 80%, (\$13.99 AUD per bottle and below) produced in large wineries. This large volume of wine is mainly made by the Charmat (fermented in tank) or transfer (fermented in any shape bottle and later transferred to the bottle you see on the shelf) methods.

Personally I still prefer the Méthode Champenoise (MC) for any sparkling wine, including Sparkling Reds. The wine is fermented in, and stays in, the same bottle throughout the

making of the Sparkling Red. The MC process allows maximum time on lees, giving better middle palate and balance to the wine. MC also gives finer bubbles, as bubbles reduce in size the longer the contact with the wine. This then gives a more creamy palate to the wine. Look for the words “fermented in THIS bottle” on the label. This statement gives you a guarantee of the authenticity of the Méthode Champenoise.

In Australia, the market for Sparkling Red in the southern and western states is stable, however there is great potential for more sales along the Eastern seaboard.

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There are rumours in the USA that ex-Australian winemakers have started making Sparkling Reds, and while I don't expect countries such as France, Germany and Italy to follow blindly, the style will grow as people find the tremendous match that Sparkling Red has with food.

France will eventually accept that these Australian Sparkling Reds are as unique and special in the world of wine as Champagne from the Champagne region.

In the end this Fair Dinkum Aussie wine is a great lot of fun, and very tasty with all sorts of food. Traditionally Sparkling Reds were drunk on Christmas day in Australia, with cold or hot roast turkey. Sometimes in Australia the temperature can get to 40°C, so cold turkey with salad is a common Christmas lunch. If everyone in the USA were to do as the Aussies do and enjoy a bottle with the roast turkey (at Thanksgiving in the USA), then a whole new world of Sparkling Red would open in the USA.

I recommend readers visit John Wilson's website for a more detail www.wilsonvineyard.com.au/newsletters/classic_clippings/vintage/vintage93



Photo: Hardy Wine Company.

Good cheer with Sparkling Red

W. Blake Gray wrote in the San Francisco Gate ('Australian-style red bubbly is a grown-up pleasure', 26 May 2005), "Leave it to Australia, a nation of jokesters, to take Sparkling Red wine seriously – or as seriously as they take anything Down Under. The best Australian Sparkling Red wines can be astonishing to Americans who expect grape soda pop. First of all, they're dry. And they're not frothy lightweights. They have the character of the varietal from which they're made – most often Shiraz – and also the terroir where they're grown. They can be earthy, rich and complex, with long finishes, yet the bubbles make them more food-friendly than a still wine made from the same grapes."

As Sparkling Red winemaking specialist Peter Rumball said in his article, introducing this issue's Varietal Report, "As people from countries other than Australia discover this truly unique style of wine, the popularity of Sparkling Reds will grow". Gray and Rumball's sentiments are echoed in the Sparkling Red wine production reports by Bruce Gregory from Majella Wines, Coonawarra; Grant Oschar and Sandrine Gimon of Rymill Coonawarra; Jim and Joanne Irvine of Irvine Wines, Eden Valley; Allen and Andrea Hart from DogRock Winery, Pyrenees/Grampians, Victoria; and Chris Dix, Scott Zrna and Kristin McLarty from Fox Creek Wines, McLaren Vale, South Australia.

This group of viticulturists and winemakers explain how they go about growing and making Sparkling Red wines with various grape varieties. As is customary in the *Journal's* Varietal Report, we look at a line-up of Sparkling Red wines, many of South Australian origin where it appears to be a popular addition to portfolios. The results of the tasting demonstrate the 'signature' styles that Australian wineries enjoy developing with Sparkling Red, each significantly different to the next yet always enjoyable.