

Old plantings the jewels in Barossa's crown

Torbreck is but 11 years old, yet the twists and turns of fate that have accompanied it - and founder-winemaker Dave Powell - make truth decidedly stranger than fiction. A modest birth, a relatively quick move towards celebrity, a bitter divorce, a bank-appointed receiver, two white knights, a micro-winery with only three walls crammed hermit-crab-like into an old stone dairy big enough for 3 cows and a dog and now super-cult status are some of the markers.

Powell, an accountant by training but with a self-confessed lack of interest in matters of detail, worked first as a cellar hand (starting in 1980) and eventually as a winemaker in some of the best known Barossa Valley wineries, including Yalumba, Saltram, Peter Lehmann, Wolf Blass and Rockford, where Chris Ringland was his mentor, while also doing the obligatory northern hemisphere vintages to broaden his experience.

The Barossa motherlode of gold is its patchwork quilt of typically small plantings of very old shiraz, grenache and mataro (correctly, mourvedre). Powell was (and is) not the only one to recognise the supreme quality of grapes coming from those old plantings and these days competition is fiercer than ever for the grapes. But being a small producer able to make a long term commitment on the spot and pay top prices for the right grapes puts him a long way in front of most corporate players.

Torbreck has a vintage dinner each year to thank its network of people, extending from the winery vintage crew to its sales force as far afield as the US, for their support. This year and last the food was provided by one of Australia's greatest chefs, Tetsuya Wakuda, accompanied by a team of more than a dozen from his Sydney restaurant. The food was sublime; the team had closed the restaurant at 2.30 that morning, caught the 5.30 flight to Adelaide and worked all day to create the 21 different hors d'oeuvres that preceded the four-course main meal.

I'm not sure if it was planned this way but those hors d'oeuvres mirrored the rainbow of flavours in the tasting of the individual components of the 2004 wines at the head of the Torbreck stable. First up came 14 lots of grenache and mataro that worked towards The Steading; then five lots of shiraz towards The Factor; two lots of shiraz for The Struie; the seven parcels of shiraz for the top of the range RunRig; and last the single vineyard Les Amis Grenache, a recent addition to the portfolio. Both as a winemaker and journalist I have been involved in countless such tastings, but never has one fascinated me as much as this. The fascination was of course partly driven by the wines, but equally by the brilliantly precise and evocative tasting notes created by Powell, Dan Standish and Sarah Morris, the winemaking team.

Tasting notes are vexatious things at the best of times. Some writers focus entirely on texture, structure, weight and length of the wines, eschewing flavour descriptors; others take the opposite view. I have to admit being unimpressed by tasters who find curry powder, chilli or whatever in Riesling. My imagination - and hence vocabulary - is limited on this score, better perhaps on structure and mouth-feel.

But these component wines were exactly as described; Phillipou Grenache (96 year old vines) did indeed have undertones of lavender; Dimchurch Grenache (68 year old) liquorice, fennel and aniseed; Schulz Mataro (108 year old) spicy dried herbs sour cherries and bacon fat; Materne Bush Vine Mataro (123 year old) strawberry jam, white pepper and sweet ginger spice; Schulz Shiraz (84 year old) spicy aromatics of tobacco and hoisin sauce, then black olive tapenade; Powell shiraz (102 year old) dark, brooding forest floor, crushed ants and hot tar; then back to Phillipou, this time shiraz (112 year old) incredibly floral (my interpolation), blue fruits, lavender (again), fresh plums and molasses. This is a random sample of many more notes; only when you come to the Moppa Shiraz, the 128 year old vines yielding half a tonne to the hectare and the cornerstone of RunRig, did flights of poetic fantasy come to a halt in the face of a wine of an intensity an length of flavour beyond anything I have previously encountered: essence of shiraz.

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