

"Selling Shiraz is a no-brainer, but Grenache is difficult." So says Dave Powell, founder and chief winemaker of cult Barossa Valley winery Torbreck Vintners. One of Torbreck signature wines is The Steading, a so-called Rhone Blend, a Grenache dominant blend with Mataro and Shiraz.

It's not the most expensive of Torbreck's wines but it's one of my favorites – a positive bargain at \$40 compared to \$125 for Descendant and \$220 for RunRig. It's less massive, less overwhelming and more drinkable. But, as Shiraz generally sweeps all before it in the popularity parade, Grenache is a bit lost. This gets Powell fired up: "I say to people: 'You drink Chateauneuf-du-Pape, don't you? Yes? Well it's the same grape variety'."

Grenache, long grown in a big way in the warmer regions in South Australia – the Barossa, McLaren Vale and Clare – tends to find it's way into branded wines and proprietary blends, the soft reds that used to be labeled "burgundy" or just "dry red". D'Arry's Original Shiraz Grenache (formerly D'Arenburg Burgundy) is a leading volume brand.

Indeed, Powell reckons, the name Grenache was never seen on wine labels until his former employer, Robert O'Callaghan, started the now famous Rockford winery." There were only three or four Grenaches in the Barossa 10 years ago, now there would be 40 or 50 of them."

Powell, confessing that Grenache based blends are his main passion, takes on a slightly cranky tone:" A 100 year old Grenache vineyard was pushed out recently in the Barossa. Economics did it. Shiraz is more profitable." What he means is that Grenache wines don't sell for high prices and the grape yields must be kept very low (between 2.5 and 3.7 tonnes per hectare), otherwise the wine quality isn't good.

"Shiraz and Cabernet can have different yields and ripeness levels and the wine is okay. But with Grenache you can't do that." It also oxidizes easily and is not as robust to vinify as Shiraz or cabernet.

The winemaker must get the grapes super-ripe, meaning good Grenache is always high in alcohol. "I make no excuses for the alcohol levels: 14 to 15 percent is the only way to make Grenache."

Powell may have soul mate in Chester Osborn of D'Arenberg, who also makes a lot of Grenache wine and probably sells more varietally labeled Grenache than anyone. "I'm delighted to see that Chester brought out three 2002 Grenaches to show the different terroirs of the McLarenVale. But we would never do that: for us it's the blend that counts."

In other words, single-vineyard wines may be interesting for the wine nuts to obsess over, but Powell believes the blend is always better than it's individual parts. "All components lack attributes that others supply."

Torbreck's 2003 The Steading, for example, is a blend of 120 batches of wine, made up of 54 varietal components from 36 different vineyards.

Powell recently gave members of the wine trade a pre-blending taste of some of the components of 2004 The Steading. There were six Grenaches, two Mataros and two Shiraz. Perhaps the most surprising thing was the depth of colour and palate weight of some of the Grenaches. This is a grape that often lacks colour and body, but not in the vineyard of the top Torbreck growers.

One component comes from a hectare at Powell's home. The vines, planted in 1957, are untrellised and grow as individual bushes – as with all good Barossa Grenache – and yield 3.7 tonnes a hectare. The colour is an amazing dark purple-black and the nose is extraordinarily deep in fruit-cake, dark chocolate, liquorice, and sweet almost plum jam aromas. A decadent wine in the mouth, with outstanding depth, concentration of flavour, lashings of tannin and warmth of alcohol.

The Helbig Grenache, from 1.8 hectares of 1957 planted vines at Marananga, has raisiny, prune aromas with liquorice, spice and brandied-cherry sidelights, a luxuriously fruit-sweet, viscous, almost oily textured wine. If any Grenache would work as a stand alone wine, Powell recons Helbig's would.

Anyone who likes the lavish, opulent Barossa style will enjoy The Steading. If this wine was a Shiraz or trendy Shiraz viognier (such as RunRig or Descendant) it would cost much more. As ever, unfashionable wine are good value - The Steading 2003 is \$40-\$45. It's dark, dense and fleshy, loaded with earthy, spicy, meaty, jam and liquorice flavours on a softly tannic, thickly textural frame.

Powell says his 2003 Juveniles, "is basically the same wine" as The Steading, except that it hasn't seen any oak. A fruitier, slightly leaner style, relatively elegant and full of dark berry flavours with flecks of mint and herb, it's \$27-\$30.