

LUSCIOUS LAGREIN

WORDS DAN TRAUCKI

Recently while attending a meeting of The Blackwood Winemakers and Brewers Club Inc., a good friend of mine opened up a bottle of *Hand Crafted by Geoff Hardy Lagrein 2012* and it was divine – so silky smooth and very elegant, having lost its youthful aggressiveness, yet with plenty of life in front of it. It was that wine that led me to write this article as it has been six years since I first wrote about Lagrein.

Lagrein is the exciting native Italian red variety which originates from the cool climate, Trentino-Alto Adige area of northern Italy. It was first “mentioned in dispatches” in the records of an Abbey, in the Lagarina Valley of Trentino, not far from the city of Bolzano back in the seventeenth century.

Until fairly recently, Lagrein had not really strayed away from home, but lately it has started gaining favour in Australia, with a smattering also appearing in New Zealand and in the USA. There are small plantings of Lagrein in the Central Coast region of California being used mainly for blending with Shiraz (Syrah) and Durif (Petit Syrah) with only one or two straight varietal wines made so far. In Oregon there are some very small plantings in the Willamette Valley and Umpqua Valley, where it is showing great promise.

Since I first wrote about Lagrein in 2013, there has been a 50 per cent increase in the number of wineries growing the variety here in Australia. It is now up to 40 spread from the Queensland Granite Belt up north, to Tassie down south, then across from Alpine Victoria in the east, over to its main abode, South Australia. Half of all the Aussie growers are scattered across South Australia, with every region (other than Kangaroo Island) having at least one Lagrein grower.

In the vineyard, Lagrein will go feral with vegetative growth if left up to its own devices. It requires good vineyard practices in order to avoid significant overcropping leading to thin, green, massively tannic and acidic wines. In a similar way to Grenache, if you give it too much water (less likely to happen in these days of drought) it will produce thin lolly-water-like wine that is really unfit for bottling.

However, with lots of proper attention and TLC in the vineyard, Lagrein produces gorgeous, deeply coloured, low pH wine that is tannic, high acid and divinely flavoured.

As a straight varietal wine ripe Lagrein exhibits beautiful earthy, dark cherry, plummy flavours with dark chocolate and even the occasional hint of liquorice, a mineral edge and floral acidity. It is a full bodied wine without being “heavy”. This makes it a fabulous “food wine” especially for richer, heartier dishes where the wine’s acidity and higher tannins help to cut through the richness or oiliness of the dish. When grown in its traditional cooler climate areas Lagrein produces a fairly sharp, high acidity young wine that needs a reasonable amount of time to soften off and become svelte enough to be consumed without rich food. When grown in warmer climates such as the Barossa and Riverland (where greater ripeness can be achieved) it makes a much more approachable young wine. It is still too early in the evolution of this variety in Australia to be able to tell how well these warmer climate wines will keep. However given that we live in a “now” society focused towards instant gratification, where only very few of us actually cellar wines for mature drinking, longevity is unlikely to be an issue. Especially given the greater approachability of these young, warmer climate Lagrein.

As a blender, a splash of Lagrein in a blend can certainly enhance a lighter coloured or low acid red wine, while a big more rustic Lagrein wine can be lightened up or softened by the judicious addition of a softer, less powerful variety.

Last year world renowned grape geneticist and co-author of “Wine Grapes” (the bible) with Jancis Robinson, Dr José Vouillamoz, selected ten “potentially globally important” grape varieties to succeed/look out for in the near future. Amongst them he selected two Italian varieties, one of which was Lagrein, because of its fresh acidity and deep colour.

In order to get as broad a cross-section of the wines made in Australia from a variety as possible, I asked winemakers around the country for the contribution of a sample bottle.

This time the worthy wines tasted for the article included the following:

- Conte Estate Lacrima di Terra (earth’s tear) Sparkling Lagrein 2014 (no added preservatives), McLaren Vale: While this wine was closer to being a spritzig wine than a full blown sparkling wine, it is elegant, subtle and very drinkable. This is only the second Sparkling Lagrein I have ever tasted or heard of. The first being the Sparkling Lagrein of Hartzbarn Wines at Moculta in the Barossa Valley, which unfortunately is no longer being made.

From New South Wales there was:

- Di Lusso Estate Mudgee Lagrein 2010 and 2018: The 2018 shows great potential for future development but currently has rather high acidity subduing the delightful fruit. It really needs some time to soften off or to be consumed now with very rich food which will ameliorate the acidity. The potential was borne out by the 2010 vintage which at eight years older still has amazingly youthful colour, is developing lovely bottle age complexity and is uber smooth and rounded. The acidity has faded and this is now a superb, luscious wine that can truly be enjoyed on its own.

- Cargo Road Orange Lagrein 2018: The coolest wine of the tasting, with the vineyard being on the slopes of Mt Canobolas at 860 metres above sea level, this wine was massively deep in colour, had a big, blowsy bouquet and mountains (pardon the pun) of stewed plummy flavours, well balanced and integrated, but high in acidity. This will become a stellar wine in three to five years' time as the acidity softens off and it rounds out.

Victoria was represented by:

- Gisborne Peak Macedon Ranges Lagrein 2015: At four years old this current release reflects the fact that in cooler climates the variety needs some time for the acidity to settle down. This was an excellent wine and the most Italian in style out of the whole tasting. Lighter (comparatively) in colour and body, it was very elegant with considerable, but no OTT acidity. It can accompany much lighter food dishes than most of its compatriots.

The vast majority of the wines in this tasting came from across South Australia, starting with three varietal and one blend producer from Langhorne Creek:

- Hoffer Wines Langhorne Creek Lagrein 2016 and 2017: Complexing as it ages with hints of nuttiness and meatiness, great silky flavours and gradually receding acidity. Both these are an excellent example of what Lagrein is capable of achieving here with just a smidge of patience. Give them another year or two and they will be even more delightful.
- Bremerton Wines Langhorne Creek Lagrein 2016: A sensational Aussie expression of the variety. It has all the best attributes without any of the searing acidity. It is superbly crafted, smooth, rich and perfectly rounded.

- Next Crop Langhorne Creek Lagrein 2017: Very drinkable now but will be a smasher in one to two years' time as the acidity softens off. It will be well worth the wait.
- Heartland Langhorne Creek 'Sposa e Sposa' Lagrein/Dolcetto 2014 and 2016: This is an excellent blend with the Dolcetto softening off the impact of the Lagrein acidity, making it a more approachable wine to enjoy at a younger age. Very classy.

The 2014 highlights how well this combination works as it is absolutely spot on for drinking now.

- Heartland Langhorne Creek 'Foreign Correspondent' Dolcetto/Lagrein 2018: While this was a really good wine it was slightly out of context with the Lagrein tasting, as it was light and bright, more akin to a Pinot Noir on steroids than a chunky, meaty Lagrein. Excellent to enjoy now while waiting for your Lagrein to mature and soften off.
- Heartland Langhorne Creek Dolcetto/Lagrein 2013: At six-years-old this wine has just hit its straps and is truly outstanding – demonstrating the virtues of patience with the acidic Italian red varieties.

Across the board, these wines amply demonstrate the suitability of the Langhorne Creek region for making great Lagrein.

- Wangolina Limestone Coast Lagrein 2018: You could consider this wine as a “crossover” between the cooler climate wines and the warmer climate wine. It is deeply coloured, has a slightly softer bouquet with a hint of spice, and a smooth, quite round palate but with still fairly high acidity on the finish. This will blossom into an excellent wine a bit sooner than the cooler climate wines, but still needs a bit of time.
- Dell'uva Barossa Lagrein 2015: The lone Barossan is from Mediterranean specialist, Dell'uva – who grow 38 different

Mediterranean varieties. This wine has subtle oak aromas, beautiful rich, rounded, perfumed flavours with a hint of fruit sweetness on the front palate, leading to a dry finish. It is eminently drinkable right now.

- Hand Crafted by Geoff Hardy Limestone Coast/Adelaide Hills Lagrein 2017: The only multi-area wine in the line-up. It works really well, being smooth, rich, beautifully balanced and shaping up to be every bit as great as its 2012 predecessor that inspired this article. Very classy.
- Serafino McLaren Vale Lagrein 2017: An interesting wine but a bit light on in the Lagrein varietal definition department. One judge suggested it was possibly made in a Shiraz style rather than as a Lagrein. Never-the-less a great red wine.

The Riverland was ably represented by:

- Samu Riverland Lagrein 2016 and 2018: Massively deep in colour, rich, full, well rounded body and more approachable than the young Lagrein from other regions due to lower (but still considerable) acidity. This also showed how the style of the wine is developing, with the 2016 being slightly portier in style, while the 2018 was considerably more elegant and sophisticated.
- Alex Russell Riverland 'Alejandro' Lagrein 2017 and 2018: The 2017 demonstrated how even a short amount of time aids in the development of this variety, with this wine being slightly more complex, including some lovely green olive aromas on the bouquet, and slightly more developed than its younger sibling.

The 2018 was outstanding, almost black in colour, big flavours of plums, rich, round with excellent balance and just the right amount of acidity on the finish. The most approachable/drink now (on its own) wine of the tasting.

Finally as a comparison to the "real deal" we tried:

- Alois Lageder Alto Adigio Lagrein 2008: At 11-years-old this wine was brilliant. It had a gentle bouquet with soft, well rounded flavours, loads of delightful deliciousness – superb. This is what I believe many/most Aussie Lagrein from our cooler climates will be like when they are five to eight-years-old. Perfectly divine and a sheer joy to drink.

So the story with Lagrein is that, like with a number of other emerging varieties, Australia is now producing some ripping examples, not by copying the wines from the grape's original home country, but rather by making an excellent Australian version/expression of that variety. With Aussie Lagrein there are two main styles – warmer climate (readier to drink) and those from the cooler climate (need cellaring or to be enjoyed after decanting with rich food). Either way, be it a straight varietal or in a blend, every one of the wines mentioned here is a quality wine, either ready to be enjoyed now, or requiring a modicum of patience (or rich food).

So do your palate a flavour and go and find a bottle of Lagrein and enjoy it in keeping with its style. Cheers.

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