



Viognier from Condrieu to Barossa

By NEIL ALLANBY

Driving south from Lyon toward Avignon, on the steep granite slopes of the right bank of the Rhone River we come across the wine appellation of Condrieu, centred on the town of the same name. The only authorised grape for Condrieu is viognier. However, the appellations of Condrieu and Côte-Rôtie are interspersed vineyard by vineyard; Côte-Rôtie being a red wine from syrah (shiraz) with a small percentage of viognier normally added.

Grapes have been grown on the banks of the Rhone since Roman times. However, viognier presents its challenges in both viticulture and viniculture so the land was increasingly used for other crops. As recently as the late 1970s, there were only about ten hectares under vine and, at that time, viognier was unknown outside the Condrieu appellation.

Viognier is a thick-skinned, deep-yellow-coloured grape which produces white wines that are deeply coloured, high in alcohol, of substantial body and have a tendency toward slightly low acidity, with characteristic pronounced aromas of apricot, yellow peach, blossom, honey and acacia.

Today, we are very fortunate to have the winemaker reputed to be the global industry leader

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for viognier living and working in Australia’s Barossa Valley. Her name is Louisa Rose and she is the head of winemaking at Yalumba. How did this come about you may ask. I met up with Louisa during a recent visit to the Barossa.

“It would be romantic to believe that I went to Condrieu to study viognier and wanted to replicate their wines for the Australian market,” says Louisa. “However, this was not the case. Yalumba has always been an innovative company, prepared to try out new ideas in wines, and already had a few hectares of viognier vines planted in the Eden Valley when I joined the company in 1992. Over the next six years, we explored vineyard management and wine-making concepts, techniques and their results — culminating in our premium flagship white wine, The Virgilius, which had its first vintage in 1998.” >>





The Barossa was settled in the 1840s by German-speaking Lutheran immigrants fleeing persecution from Silesia (then in Prussia, now part of Poland). George Angas had already emigrated from Scotland and, at the time, owned 11,330 ha of land spread across the Barossa and surrounding hills. In 1842 he sponsored three shiploads of Silesians to settle on this land. The Barossa town of Angaston is named after him. Samuel Smith emigrated with his family from Dorset in England in 1847 and also settled in Angaston. Other immigrants followed bringing additional vines from Europe, as well as more vines from Cape Town when their ships restocked en route.

Samuel Smith and his family moved to Angaston and established Yalumba in 1849 and, over the subsequent five generations, developed it into one of Australia's most successful and innovative independent wine companies still in private hands. It is now owned and run by Robert Hill-Smith.

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That viognier grown in the Barossa can make an excellent flagship white wine should come as no surprise. From my first visit to the Barossa, the similarities with the Rhone Valley stood out — from having an all-important similar terroir necessary for grape growing, to having the same sense of food, family and community. The Barossa simply looks and feels like a Rhone Valley wine district, and the fact that its most significant variety is shiraz (syrah) adds weight to the argument. Viognier is generally grown on the elevated and cooler hills of the Eden Valley, the Barossa's beautiful high country.

Yalumba has always been a progressive company, with a curiosity to discover the knowledge in order to act and be accepted as a leader in the industry.

Says Louisa: “Yalumba prides itself on encouraging us to play around with new ideas and concepts, an environment which is ideal for innovative wine-making.”

Yalumba first planted a small area of viognier vines in the Eden Valley in 1980 to discover and learn what this varietal could bring. Experimenting with different varietals continues at Yalumba with such recently planted white wine varietals as roussanne, verdelho and albarino. A wine made from roussanne grapes has recently been launched.

The development of a new wine can be broken down into three major concepts — grape growing, wine making and developing the market with consumers. The vines need a minimum of four years' maturity and will develop more complex wines over the subsequent years. Developing a new wine is a team effort but needs a champion to bring the concept to fruition.

Louisa grew up in Melbourne in a vine-growing family. While studying at Adelaide's Roseworthy College, she worked a vintage with Yalumba before returning to the Barossa in 1993 for full-time employment. She soon took on Yalumba's white wines and experimental work with new varietals, with a particular focus on viognier. Over the subsequent years, she championed the development of Yalumba's flagship white wine The Virgilius. The challenge that faced Louisa and her team was to maximise flavour and texture while maintaining freshness and finesse.

“We found that the viognier grapes developed their characteristic aromas when allowed to fully ripen on the vines,” says Louisa. “Being thick skinned and potentially high in colour, once pressed, the juice contains considerable phenolics which give the wine its body. We let the juice react with the air, or oxidise, which results in it turning brown — but this colour precipitates out during fermentation leading to a more complex wine that is pale in colour and fine. We use natural indigenous yeasts with barrel fermentation and ageing on lees. We know we have healthy vines — there is no need to supplement that which is naturally occurring.”

Yalumba has one of the best wine laboratories in the Barossa. According to Louisa: “This gives us the confidence to do less with wine-making techniques — the wines are made in the vineyard.”

Yalumba’s viognier range has now been extended to include Eden Valley Viognier (Yalumba’s “essence of viognier”), Y Series (entry level), a botrytis viognier (FSW8B from Wrattontully, another South Australian region which is ideal for botrytis cinerea infection) as well as an eau de vie called V de Vie.

It is one thing to set out to make a new wine, but it is another thing entirely to be able to develop a market demand. The Virgilius is very much food friendly. While it’s a good match for the usual white-meat dishes, it becomes an excellent match when these dishes are given an Asian-fusion ginger-spice treatment. The Virgilius also easily accompanies Thai and Indian food, as well as a spicy Moroccan lamb and apricot tagine. And remember, when you are in the Barossa, Maggie Beer’s Farm is a 15-minute drive from Yalumba, so you can stock up on your necessary food ingredients.

There is considerable science in developing a wine glass to bring out the best characteristics of a wine. As an early pioneer in the development of viognier

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wines, Louisa faced a challenge — which wine glass design to use? After approaching the world’s best-known designer of wine glasses, no specific glass was recommended. The best available option was a chardonnay glass. This simply would not do — so Louisa worked with Zerrutti of Italy to develop the viognier glass, launched in 2008, to ensure maximum enjoyment of The Virgilius.

In 2010 in Australia alone, there were 1,400 ha of viognier grown for all producers. As a cult grape, viognier has seen a resurgence over the last 20 years, led by innovative wine companies such as Yalumba and people like Louisa Rose. After her 23-year history at Yalumba, Louisa has been described as a visionary, an innovator and the creative force behind the viognier revolution. Time to celebrate with a glass of The Virgilius! ♣

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