

OPINION

CAMPBELL MATTINSON TELLS US WHAT HE THINKS



Lifting the veil

Campbell Mattinson recounts the story behind one of Australia's most interesting and innovative wines.



IT'S PRETTY AMAZING that one of the best new wines on the Australian wine landscape started off as an accident, was initially hidden by its maker from the winery owner, and is so challenging to most wine drinkers that it can't be ordered from the winery's website; you have to talk to someone from the winery first, who

explains what you're in for, and only then are you allowed access. It's enough to draw comparisons with the early days of Penfolds Grange - which wasn't an accident, but which was also (famously) hidden behind false walls after Penfolds' management ordered that its production be stopped, and which was also challenging to most of the drinkers who first got to taste it.

The wine I'm talking about here is made by the Crittenden winery on the Mornington Peninsula, in the tiniest of volumes, and is called Cri de Coeur Savagnin. I'd love to claim this comparison between the early days of Cri de Coeur and Grange as my own because it's so apt, so well made and so romantic, but it's Halliday Tasting Team member Jane Faulkner who came up with it. Faulkner knows the wine well. She awarded the current 2017 release a whopping 97/100, and has championed it from its first release, just a few years ago.

THE REASON Crittenden Cri de Coeur is an accident is that it only came about because of the famous albariño mix-up of 2009. In the lead up to that year, a number of Australian wineries had albariño vines growing in their vineyards, or they thought they did, and had been releasing wines under the name of albariño over the preceding few years. Then it was discovered that the vines, the whole lot of them, were not albariño and instead were the savagnin variety. A funny feeling then came over the Australian industry at wide, where no one really knew what to do with all this not-so-exciting savagnin; it was like being told that you'd been dating the wrong twin, without you knowing it. Or something like that. In any case Matt Campbell, no relation, who makes wine at Crittenden with Rollo Crittenden himself, took a barrel of the suddenly unwanted savagnin and, of his own volition, made sure that no one looked after it, so to speak. That is, he didn't sulphur it, and let it evaporate over time inside the barrel, and left it that way for years. During this time a protective layer of flor yeast developed on the surface of the wine. And that's where the magic begins.

This winemaking technique is not new; indeed it's inspired directly by the great Vin Jaune wines of the Jura region of eastern France. Both winemaker Matt Campbell and us drinkers were also lucky, or luckier than Max Schubert had been with his Grange, in that when Rollo Crittenden, who had the power to knock this experiment on the head, was eventually shown the wine he instantly 'got it' and has been a key driver of its annual production ever since.

What this treatment of the savagnin grapes does is create a nutty, wild, sherry-like wine that, from there, goes its own way, by its own design. I was lucky enough to taste through every vintage so far released recently - 2011, 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2017 - and all of them left me salivating. They are released at four to five years of age, and every one of them so far has been both distinct and wonderful, though the 2013 and the current 2017 are particularly striking.

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SO MUCH so that, if you were asked to present to an international grand jury on the glory of fine Australian wine, you would be mad not to request that Crittenden Cri de Coeur be one of your key exhibits. It's that good or, at least, that distinctive.

The Crittenden winery, it's important to point out, makes a range of high quality wines, and although I want to jump up and down right now and say that the Cri de Coeur Savagnin is now, against all odds, the best of them, the truth is that it has some stiff competition. Crittenden is a fantastic winery. But wow, this Cri de Coeur Savagnin takes the Crittenden winery and gives it a life on a different map. This wine is not only different, and stellar, it has the ability to stop you in your tracks, and make you think. It's like a piece of art; it asks questions of you, as you ask questions of it. Which doesn't mean that you're going to like it. But it's an Australian wine that everyone should try at least once - if they'll sell you a bottle. ●