

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Savagnin has a troubled past in Australia, but as **Jane Faulkner** discovers, it's well and truly coming into its own.

THERE ARE SIGNS everywhere as to how this day will pan out, starting with the freeway that's surprisingly sparse of traffic. The crisp, cool morning is bathed in a delicate light, making the drive from Melbourne to Crittenden Estate on the Mornington Peninsula so relaxing. While many know chardonnay and pinot noir are the region's mainstays, they are not the impetus for my visit. Instead, an edifying savagnin tasting awaits. Yep. Savagnin. Rock on.

Winemaker Rollo Crittenden (pictured right) has assembled a vertical tasting of 11 wines that tell the Australian story of this ancient French variety. It turns out to be a tasting in three parts, representing distinct winemaking styles, including skin-contact and under *voile*, a natural yeast that forms a protective layer across the wine preventing it from oxidising. However, the line-up starts with Crittenden Estate's first foray with the variety of four wines under the Spanish-themed Los Hermanos label. The first wine is poured – the inaugural 2008 – with albarino stamped on the front. What? Albarino? That's an Iberian variety. Confused? As it turns out, so were several producers and growers more than a decade ago, including Rollo. To recap, there are no links between albarino, or alvarinho in Portuguese, and savagnin. But there was a spectacular stuff-up with the planting material imported by the CSIRO from Spain in 1989. In a nutshell, it was a case of misidentification with the error originating at a Spanish vine collection via cuttings from France. What a mess, given it took 20 years to come to a head.



"I was trying to convince myself, and others, that it wasn't true, saying [the pending] DNA testing will prove it," Rollo recalls. Official DNA analysis came in April 2009: unequivocally savagnin. It meant that as of the '09 vintage, it would be illegal to call it albarino. What to do? "Well, I then fought tooth and nail to have everyone adopt a name that kept a Spanish slant because we'd built this Los Hermanos label and I was desperate to keep the focus on it." Understandably there was anger and frustration, but the name had to go. An absurd number of synonyms were proffered – 64 actually: a glass of christkindlestraube anyone? Thankfully, common sense prevailed and savagnin was adopted. The Los Hermanos 2009 label looked the same as the '08 – a small sailboat with two children aboard – except Tributo a Galicia now featured, a cheeky reference to the Spanish region where albarino

grows. In small print, savagnin is etched onto the side of the boat. The following two vintages, including the last one ever produced in 2011, had one word – Tributo. The brand Los Hermanos continues today, accommodating a tempranillo and another white called Saludos, but falling sales and an identity crisis for Tributo meant it was a lost cause.

Despite the appalling mix-up, it's a shame the spotlight dimmed momentarily on savagnin. It is an old, prestigious variety with family links to many others, including pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon. It is traminer, or more accurately, traminer is savagnin. Under the savagnin umbrella are natural variations revealing its clonal diversity; there is savagnin blanc, and without repeating the main nomenclature, there's also vert, jaune, the rare muscaté and rosé, plus the unmistakable gewurztraminer, the aromatic variety, which is a mutation of savagnin rosé. Despite speculation, it seems the variety originated from the Jura and is the soul of the region's famous vin jaune, (yellow wine), a dry, complex wine made under *voile*, akin to sherry's flor. Unlike sherry, Vin Jaune is not fortified, but shares similar oxidative notes imparting umami and unique characters.

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Rather than lament what could have been, recognising savagnin as special in its own right would change the story. It's alive with tangy, citrus flavours and natural high acidity. Rollo was battling to hang onto a tenuous Spanish connection, but dropped it like a hot potato, thanks to winemaker Matt Campbell. He credits Matt for the about-face after tasting savagnin under *voile*, specifically, a Crittenden Estate savagnin under *voile*, now part of the Cri de Coeur label.

"Matt was more in tune with Jura wines and he'd held back in barrel some of the 2011 savagnin, which was unsulfured, and had developed a flor," Rollo says. "When I tasted it, it was astonishing and signified the turning point. The wine didn't spend a long time under flor [as they do in the Jura, at least five years in barrel by law], only a couple of years, but it had beautiful aldehydes and there was something special about it."

As Matt says, it took on the characters they expected under flor,

but more importantly, it gave them the confidence to continue. Matt knew that because in 2006, he and his wife Tara travelled to France and tasted their first Vin Jaune with its perfect accompaniment, Comte cheese. They were hooked, and a side-trip to the Jura followed. "So, the minute we found out we had savagnin [at Crittenden Estate] and not albarino, I thought, here we go, this is going to be great. We just had to block out the [faux albarino] noise."

While true albarino has subsequently arrived in Australia, Rollo shakes his head. He's not interested. This tasting is a revelation. The older savagnins are holding up remarkably well, but the Cri de Coeur Sous Voile ("under veil") styles are remarkable. Rollo and Matt have never done a comprehensive range tasting until this day. They're chuffed. There's a sense of vindication, perhaps.

"It's amazing to look at these wines to see the transition," Rollo says. "The more I got my head around savagnin, the more I saw it as an opportunity rather than a problem. This tasting shows that, but I'd like to think the best is yet to come." ●

CRITTENDEN ESTATE SAVAGNIN TASTING

BRACKET 1

2008 Los Hermanos Albarino, King Valley fruit

2009 Los Hermanos Tributo a Galicia Savagnin, King Valley fruit

2010 Los Hermanos Tributo Savagnin, King Valley and Crittenden Estate fruit

2011 Los Hermanos Tributo Savagnin, Crittenden Estate fruit

The 2008 is proof of its ageability, thanks to natural high acidity. Still incredibly vibrant, floral with lemon zest, its freshness and acidity belie its age. The '09 and '10 are in good shape, too, but with more texture and phenolics. The '10 is my pick of the bunch. The '11 is too developed.

BRACKET 2

2015 The Zumma

2016 The Zumma

2017 The Zumma

This is the skin-contact collection from estate-grown fruit. The 2015 is smoky, textural and dabbled with lemon drops. And while the '16 is dominated by oak squishing out the fruit, it has depth and drive, but the '17 is excellent and my pick of this trio. It is a shame this wine is no longer made, as the focus is on the *voile*-aged style.

BRACKET 3

2011 Cri de Coeur Sous Voile

2013 Cri de Coeur Sous Voile

2015 Cri de Coeur Sous Voile

2016 Cri de Coeur Sous Voile (current vintage, \$80)

None made in 2012 and 2014

The highlight of the tasting. Given the '11 spent barely two years under *voile*, it's nicely oxidative and savoury. The '13 is outstanding: complex, oxidative characters with preserved lemons yet ultra-fresh and moreish. 2015 follows the same winemaking with similar flavours, but added green-apple tang and enticing aldehydes. The new 2016 is an outlier; definitely a product of a warm vintage. It's luscious with honeyed and quince paste flavours, rich and ripe with an eyebrow-raising 15.8% ABV, yet it holds its own, and best in its youth. Hard to pick a preference out of '13 and '15, but it's '13 at a pinch.

Macvin – non-vintage fortified \$90

The estate's latest addition is this fortified savagnin. The impressive first release late last year sold out quickly. Bottling Number 2 was made with 2020 savagnin juice, blended with some '13 flor wine and neutral fortifying spirit. It's morphed into an amber elixir, sweetish, full of warm spices, brandy flavours and cumquat marmalade.