

Old versus new

By Philip White

How do Australia's great varietals compare to the best of France? A recent tasting of top imported wines sheds some light.

WHEW. Flat out like a lizard drinking. Somewhere about \$80,000 of wine at one tasting? Couldn't get a better man for the job. With the kisser still purple from the Wine of the Year Awards, the nose was straight back on the winestone at Kaesler in the Barossa, where Reid Bosward and his banker/backer, Ed Peter, had pulled the corks from 80 bottles, and invited about that many to drink 'em.

In that most Australian of modern fermentation cellars, the country's most certifiable wine tragics faced the best of the old world: Bordeaux, Burgundy, and the Rhone. There'd not been anything like it since the heady '80s, when the Aussie dollar bought quite a few more French drinking vouchers than it now does. Ficofi is the key. Check www.ficofi.com - for huge piles of money, this elite troop of nerd wine commandos supply great wines to big events: conferences, funerals, weddings, the signing of treaties. Reid felt it was time to re-expose a few old European secrets to the brash antipodeans.

``Get all the younger guys; they've got to see these wines. It's a reality check. Everyone remarked how close Irvine's Grand Merlot was to the Petrus, for example," Reid said.

So how do 80 bottles add up to \$120,000?

Try big ones for a start: double magnum of Chateau Haut Brion '94. Jeroboams of Mouton Rothschild '90, Chateau d'Yquem '96, Nuits Saint Georges Clos de la Marechale '99. You get my drift. Plonko heaven.

It was a pleasure to be interrupted twice during my examination of Chateau Figeac '78, '82, '83, '86 and '90, both times by the biodynamic master, Julian Castagna. The first was to give a couple of biodynamic premier cru Burgundies a nudge - ``quick, before they're gone".

We demolished strings of great vintages with the same abandon and humble acceptance the sommeliers of Paris showed saving their cellars from the Huns rattling along the rues outside.

It was unavoidable to compare these French glories to the local wines I'd tasted in the Hyatt Regency just days before. Never has the competition been more intense. And the score? Well, work upwards from the south of France. The Rhone fared pretty poorly, I thought, compared with wines like those Castagna makes at Beechworth, and new, much cheaper local treasures like Charlie Melton's Father In Law Shiraz '03, or Duane Coates's Organic McLaren Vale Shiraz '03. (See Page 5 for tasting notes on both of these.) Or, indeed, any of the bold Barossas that Reid makes at Kaesler.

Burgundy? Ach. After all that effort, what a delight to die confounded by pinot noir. We have nothing to match jewels like the best Gevrey Chambertins or Romanee Conti's Grands Echezeaux.

``When I worked at Avery's in Pommie land, we pronounced that grand etchkazocks," giggled Colin Glaezter. ``Sold heaps of it."

But truly, pinots like John Ellis's gorgeous new Bellvale Gippsland '03 are having a good bite of Burgundy's heels, and chardonnays like Stonier's Mornington Peninsula Reserve '03 are snapping feistily, too.

South Australia's a bit hot for these. But then, the local Protero Gumeracha '05, which Paul Drogemuller made fresh, without oak, for Frank Baldasso, seems to have set a bar somewhere around the most severe and intense chablis.

It's the Bordeaux wines that we still most obviously miss the point of, which is tragic, because we can easily grow the Bordeaux varieties. It's about cabernet, and the anonymous goose who first decided that we should serve it straight.

Cabernet is a leafy, humourless wine of a grape with very little middle palate. The Bordelais know well how to flesh this out with big plummy merlot and perfectly fragrant cabernet franc, as much as they bolster its skinniness with the intense vegetals and blackberry of malbec, or the bitumen and gravel of petit verdot.

That's why I was happy to sink myself in Figeac, and the other wines from Saint-Emilion and Pomerol. Although Figeac is distinctive for its persistence with cabernet sauvignon, these Right Bank Bordeaux districts grow much more merlot and cabernet franc than straight cab, and blend them with great proficiency to make wines that are more easily loved in their youth, better rounded, more alluring and prettier to sniff than the austere cab-merlots from the posh palaces of Medoc over the river. Which is not to say the Right Bank brews won't age. Medoc is Coonawarra. But Coonawarra wrapped itself in too much overt oak in the '80s and '90s, and while it's true a lot of Bordeaux has followed it into the carpentry to please America, there's better balance coming now, in treats like the wines of Balnaves, Murdock and the organic Highbank.

But then, the prettiest local blend of merlot and cabernet I've seen in yonks was the Mount Jagged '98 from the Southern Fleurieu. Petit, maybe, but Pomerol, too. You mark my words.