

wine

Photography **Jennifer Soo**

namegames

Gris or grigio? Tokay or topaque? Peter Bourne decodes wine labelling.

A lifetime ago, Australians drank wines labelled as champagne, claret, burgundy and chablis. These names had been “borrowed” from the great wine regions of France – although the local counterparts were invariably made from totally different grape varieties. In the 1970s, Australia moved to varietal labelling, with classic European varieties such as riesling, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, pinot noir, shiraz and cabernet sauvignon dominating our vineyards and the market.

But when we started exporting our wines in the mid-’90s, we caused some ripples overseas and our industry body, the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation, reached an agreement with the EU to drop the remaining generic labelling terms, especially on our fortified wines – port, sherry and tokay. The revised names are fortified, apera and topaque respectively, hardly evocative names likely to entice a new generation of drinkers to this declining wine sector.

But it’s our most prolific red variety, shiraz, that has the most confusing moniker. Syrah is its correct viticultural name and just how or why it was Anglicised to shiraz is unknown. The theory that the variety had its origins in Persia (modern-day Iran), where there is a city called Shiraz, has been debunked. DNA profiling in 1999 found syrah to be the offspring of obscure grapes dureza and mondeuse blanche, spawned in the northern Rhône at least a millennium ago.

While most of the wine world calls the variety syrah, Australia has stuck to shiraz to create a bold style – a style that has taken the world by storm. Meanwhile, in an ironic twist, the French have applied to the EU to allow them to use shiraz on some regional labelling.

Grenache, the southern Rhône stalwart, thrives in warm growing conditions and is at home in the balmy climes of McLaren Vale and the Barossa and Clare valleys. Grenache also thrives in temperate Spain, where it’s known as garnacha. On the island of Sardinia, it takes the name cannonau. Adding to the confusion, grenache’s southern Rhône stablemate, mourvèdre, reappears as monastrell in Spain.

For a long time, Americans believed that the Californian red zinfandel had its origins in Hungary. But ampelographers (the scientists of grape varieties) have discovered that zinfandel is a Croatian variety – crljenak kaštelanski – and is genetically identical to primitivo, which is a bold, brooding red variety from Italy’s Apulia region. So now we have wines labelled zinfandel and primitivo but none crljenak kaštelanski – perhaps because we can’t pronounce it.

Australian winegrowers have created their own confusions. Pinot gris has been (seriously) grown here for only 20 years but, swayed by ethnic origins, some makers have decided to label it under its Italian moniker of pinot grigio. It’s the same variety, with a pinky/grey skin, hence pinot gris (grey in French) or pinot grigio (grey in Italian).

Not all the confusion is self-inflicted. Ten years ago, the CSIRO imported cuttings of the Spanish variety albariño. The vines adapted well and produced lush, lemon-pith-flavoured whites – hailed as the “next big thing”. Oops. DNA checking revealed that the Spanish had instead sent savagnin cuttings – an idiosyncratic variety from France’s Jura region. Still, it tastes delicious and, after all, what’s in a name?



McHenry Hohnen Rocky Road Zinfandel 2007 (Margaret River, WA), \$8
Inspired by the “zins” he enjoyed in California, David Hohnen pioneered zinfandel in this country, first at Cape Mentelle and now at McHenry Hohnen. His style is rich, bold and flavoursome. Descriptors such as plum cake, dark chocolate and cinnamon fit this brazen beauty.



Chapel Hill il Vescovo Savagnin 2009 (McLaren Vale, SA), \$22
This is Chapel Hill’s first albariño – oops, savagnin. Winemaker Michael Fragos kept the juice “on its skins” to extract more flavour and richness. The wine has gentle aromatics of citrus blossom and white peach with a twist of lemon pith. Its flavours are fine and friendly with a long finish.



Cascabel Monastrell 2007 (McLaren Vale, SA), \$46
Madrid-born Susana Fernandez and her partner, Duncan Ferguson, have brought a Spanish flourish to McLaren Vale. Their old-vine mourvèdre/monastrell is a heady wine but in no way heavy. The rich blackberry, dark chocolate and liquorice flavours are spiced with clove and star anise.



De Bortoli Yarra Valley Syrah 2007 (Yarra Valley, Vic), \$62
Steve Webber is a self-confessed Francophile. This is no heroic shiraz but a more mid-weight, smoothly textured style that fits the mould of the great syrah from the northern Rhône. It’s about red fruits, not black, with lots of raspberry and cherry flavours.



Pfeiffer Rutherglen Topaque 500ml (Rutherglen, Vic), \$20 cellar door
Okay, tokay is now topaque but everything else about this classic Rutherglen fortified remains the same. It’s made from (white) muscadelle grapes with a healthy dose of grape spirit added in the early stages. Luscious is the word and blue cheese or ice-cream the best accompaniments.