

Alternative Reality

How Australian wine changed course

Max Allen and
the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show



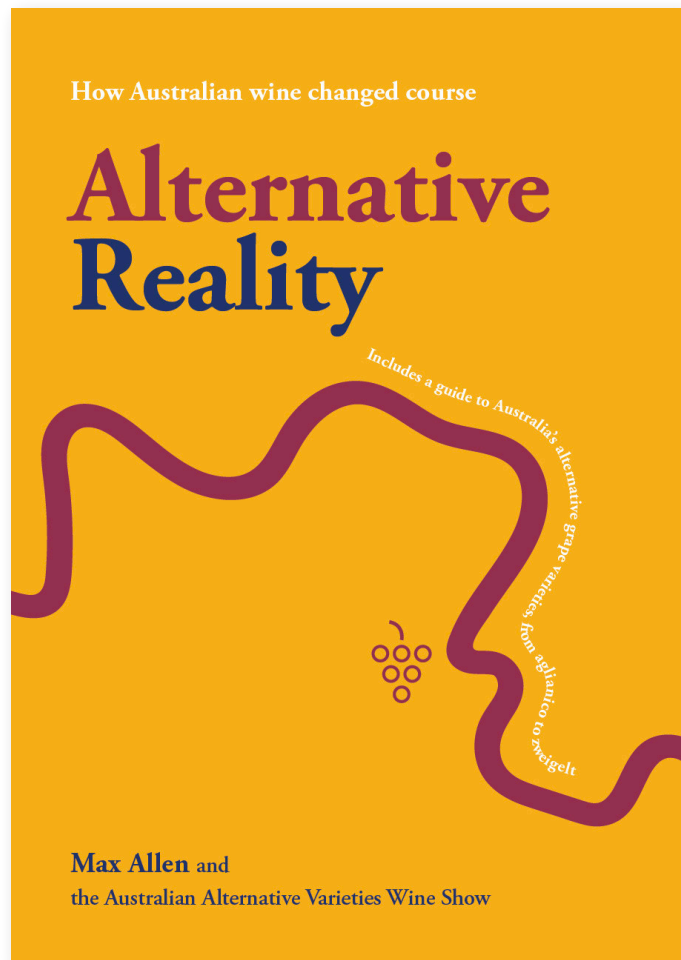
Australian Alternative Varieties
Wine Show

This book is for anyone who wants to deepen their understanding of why the Australian wine scene is the way it is today and get more enjoyment out of a wider range of delicious wines.

Australian wine has been through a revolution over the last two decades. New grape varieties, new wine styles, new winemaking personalities and cultures have emerged, dramatically changing how this country thinks about and enjoys wine. And much of this change can be traced to a wine competition in Mildura, in the remote northwest of Victoria.

Since 2001, the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show has examined and championed exciting new non-mainstream grapes (anything but chardonnay and shiraz ...), with a roll call of leading winemakers, sommeliers, writers and viticulturists travelling from all over the country each November to talk and taste, to swap ideas, and to imagine a different wine landscape.

This book tells the story of those last two decades; not just of the show, but also of the wider world of Australian wine, through profiles of the key people who made it happen. It also includes comprehensive information about more than 150 different alternative grape varieties currently grown in Australia – what the wines made from these grapes taste like, and who the key producers are.



The Author

Max Allen is an award-winning journalist and author, and a lecturer in wine studies at the University of Melbourne. Max has been writing about booze for thirty years: he is the wine and drinks columnist for the Australian Financial Review, long-time contributor to *Gourmet Traveller Magazine*, Australian correspondent for *JancisRobinson.com* and a regular presenter at masterclasses and festivals around the world.

Max has authored or co-authored over a dozen books, including *The History of Australian Wine*, *The Future Makers*, *Red and White*, and *Intoxicating: Ten Drinks That Shaped Australia*.



Top: 2015 AAVWS wines lined up for judging
Bottom: 2013 S.C. Pannell Tempranillo Touriga

Jancis had written a similar, if much less comprehensive guide back in 1986. Called *Vines, Grapes & Wines*, it grouped varieties into a clear hierarchy: 'classic' grapes such as cabernet, 'major' grapes such as grenache, and 'minor' grapes such as mansanne. *Wine Grapes* by contrast listed the varieties alphabetically.

'The alphabetical approach was primarily a question of making the readers' lives easier,' Jancis told me at the time. 'Flipping between sections in a 1200-page book would not be easy. [But] I think with everyone being much better informed about less well-known grapes nowadays, we'd have had a riot on our hands if we had tried to categorise them by quality or status.'

A pragmatic decision, then, but also one that demonstrated a new way of thinking about grape varieties. An acknowledgment that newly-trendy ancient regions such as Etna in Sicily and Jura in France were producing wines as desirable in today's market as all but the loftiest 'icons' perched on top of the old classifications of wine, from grape varieties no-one had paid any attention to just a decade or so before.



2015 Hither & Yon Nero D'Avola

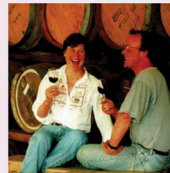
The AAVWS was slowly beginning to expand away from the longer-established northern European Italian and French varieties, too, spreading the love among varieties traditionally from warmer, more southerly homelands, and younger, fresher styles of wine.

In 2012, for example, Steve Pannell walked away with the Red Bonfiglioli award for wine of show with a savvy, four-year-old nebbiolo. But the following year – and, remarkably, the year after that – he won the same award for a much brighter juicier style of one-year-old red made from the Iberian grape varieties tempranillo and touriga. A wine that captured the trend, still with us today, for lighter, crunchier reds.

The mid-2010s also saw more and more southern Italian grape varieties take out the top awards at the show. There was an incredible run from 2015 to 2018 when Coriole and Hither & Yon, both from McLaren Vale, shared the Best Red trophy with wines made from nero d'Avola. The southern Italian whites had a similarly strong run through this period: from 2009 to 2018, the Best White award went either to a fiano or a vermentino – apart from just one year, 2013, when it went to a cortese.

The theme of 2013's Talk and Taste was 'Spotlight on Sicily', with special guests Alessio Planeta, representing his family's winery, one of the island's most progressive, and Dr Piero Scalfi of the University of Palermo, who, the year before, had co-authored a paper outlining what lessons warm-climate growers in Australia could learn from the Sicilians.

The southern Italian varieties, particularly fiano and nero, were clearly finding their feet out in the wider world of Australian wine. So, the focus of the Talk and Taste sessions then began to shift to other locations. First Georgia in 2014, and then less obvious – but no less exciting – parts of Europe.



Kevin McCarthy and Kathleen Quealy

— pioneers of pinot gris and skin-contact whites on the Mornington Peninsula; Kathleen, speaker at Talk and Taste 2003 and 2004, committee member/ambassador from 2006.

When Kevin McCarthy and Kathleen Quealy planted pinot gris vines on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula in the late 1980s, they were the first winemakers in Australia to give the grape variety a serious push.

It was a big punt at the time, to back a then virtually unknown new grape variety – especially when everyone wanted to drink chardonnay. But – thanks in no small part to the couple's irrepressible enthusiasm – it worked. Their first, small vintage was snatched up by legendary Melbourne restaurateur Hermann Schneider. And their second release, in 1993, was an immediate hit at the Dog's Bar in St Kilda, one of the era's most influential venues, founded by hospitality visionary Don Fitzpatrick and run by Neil Prentice, who now makes wine at Moondarra vineyard in Gippsland.

'I remember walking into the Dog's Bar,' says Kathleen, three decades later. 'Celia

[her daughter] was on my hip. Neil was there and I gave him a bottle. He said, "Oh, this is really good", and he went and got Don and they all came out and made a big fuss.'

'Don went, "Fark, that's good", says Kevin. "And started pouring it for everyone ten cases.'

Kevin was thirty-five. Kathleen was thirty-two. The pair had studied oenology in the 1980s, him at Roseworthy in South Australia, her at Charles Sturt Uni in Wagga. At that time, there was less of a cultural divide between grape growers and winemakers – or 'builders and architects', as she puts it – and more of a sense of holistic 'winemaking'.

Kathleen was inspired by one of her lecturers, Max Loder, who had planted some pinot gris at Wagga. So, after she and Kevin met, got together, started having children and decided to establish their own winery, it was this grape that she was keen to plant – as well as other non-mainstream varieties.

'We also put in a nursery block of a whole lot of different grapes,' says Kathleen. 'And we went on a planting binge – we put in a whole lot of vineyards around the region, each with pinot noir, pinot gris, and an aromatic variety too: muscat or viognier.'

Thanks in part to the success of the early T'Gallant wines, other growers started planting and making pinot gris and/or pinot grigio. In 2003, corporate wine giant Southcorp (now Treasury Wine Estates) bought T'Gallant – not because they were interested in Kevin and Kathleen's thriving cellar door, but because they wanted a pinot grigio label they could grow into a big brand. Kevin kept working for the new owners, while Kathleen bought a vineyard on the Peninsula and set up her own, eponymous label.

By this time, Kevin had started travelling to Italy regularly. He and Kathleen had fallen in love with friulano and other lesser-known north-eastern Italian and Slovenian varieties, and Kathleen was keen to plant some or graft some over at her new vineyard. She couldn't find any cuttings available in the established nurseries. But at the AAVWS in Mildara, she met a grower, Denis Pasur, who had planted friulano back in the 1980s, using cuttings that had been imported by the CSIRO.

Around this time, in the early 2000s, Neil Prentice also introduced Kevin and Kathleen to the wines that Josko Gravner was producing on the Friulian border with Slovenia: so-called 'orange' wines made from white grapes fermented and matured on skins in big clay amphora-like vessels called *qvevri*.



Aglianico

Origins: southern Italy
Grown here since the 2000s
Area planted: less than 50 ha
Number of producers: 25
In its home in Campania and Basilicata, this long-established variety can produce complex, fragrant, age-worthy red wines with firm tannins. It has proven to be a grape well-suited to warmer sites in Australia, from the Riverina to McLaren Vale, but also does surprisingly well in cooler, higher-altitude spots like Beechworth. The grape was once thought to have come from Greece – aglianico does sound a lot like 'heliotropis' – but grapevine specialists dispute this theory. (image: Chalmers)

Chalmers (Heathcote), Fighting Gully Road (Beechworth), Jany (Barossa Valley), Prometheus (Riverland), Purple Hands (After Five Wine Co (Barossa Valley), River Tera (Riverland), SC Russell (McLaren Vale).



Albarino / Alvarinho

Origins: Portugal and Spain
Grown here since the 2010s
Area planted: less than 25 ha
Number of producers: 20
This Iberian variety became trendy in the early 2000s thanks to its ability to make deliciously fruity, citrusy, grape-pulpy – and very seafood-friendly – whites in warm maritime regions like Galicia. As a result, quite a few Australian growers and makers sought out cuttings and planted them – and then discovered, in 2009, that the vines they'd planted were in fact the (then) decidedly un-trendy savagnin. After the shock wore off, more growers sought out cuttings of real albarino, planted them, and are now making some convincing, seafood-friendly whites. (image: PlantGrape)

Arwinne (Adelaide Hills), Dalfrina (Nagambie Lakes), Pato (Clare Valley), Xanxon & Killen (Riesbergton).



Arinto

Origins: Portugal
Grown here since the 2010s
Area planted: less than 25 ha
Number of producers: 5
This newcomer to the Australian viticultural scene is traditionally grown across Portugal's regions, where it is found lending its nervy, crisp character to seafood-whites like vinho verde. The vine's drought tolerance, late ripening and high acidity make it particularly well-suited to warmer sites in Australia, and early examples of wine made from it – dry, crisp, lean, refreshing – are promising. (image: Wine Australia)

Lina Ramble (McLaren Vale), River Tera (Riverland).



Arneis

Origins: Piemonte, NW Italy
Grown here since the 1990s
Area planted: less than 50 ha
Number of producers: 40
This grape can produce beautifully aromatic but dry and savoury white wines, with hints of ripe pear perfume, and an almost pear-like textural quality. It's difficult to grow, though – its name translates as 'little rascal' – which saw the vine almost disappear from Piemonte vineyards in the 1970s. Thankfully, a couple of visionary winemakers persisted, and their wines inspired a handful of Australian growers to plant it. (image: Chalmers)

Dhaga (Mornington Peninsula), Nepenthe (Adelaide Hills), Riesbergton Estate (Riesbergton), Sora Miranda (King Valley), Symphonia (King Valley).



Assyrtiko

Origins: Santorini, Greece
Grown here since the 2010s
Area planted: less than 20 ha
Number of producers: 1
Assyrtiko is a drought-and-heat-tolerant white grape vine traditionally grown as basket-like bushes, trained low to the stony, volcanic ground on Santorini. Despite the lack of rainfall and constant winds on the island, assyrtiko typically makes mineral-rich dry white wines notable for their high acidity and low pH but full body and robust alcohol (14 percent is not uncommon). Peter Barry of Jim Barry wines in Clare imported the first cuttings of assyrtiko in the late 2000s, and is still the only (very good) producer. (image: Jim Barry Wines)

Jim Barry (Clare Valley).



Barbera

Origins: Piemonte, NW Italy
Grown here since the 1970s
Area planted: less than 100 ha
Number of producers: 90
While that other Piemonte red grape, nebbiolo, attracts all the wine-geek attention, barbera is more widely planted in its homeland because it produces red wines that have a deeper purple colour, more generous berry fruit, softer tannin, but a lip-smacking acidity crying out for food. Along with nebbiolo and sangiovese, barbera was first made in Australia by Italian winemaker Carlo Cottino in the 1970s but didn't gain a wider presence until the 1990s. (image: Chalmers)

Angullung (Orange), Billy Bottom (Alpine Valley), Coulter (Adelaide Hills), First Drop (Adelaide Hills), First Ridge (Mudgee), Longview (Adelaide Hills), Mithosini (Alpine Valley), Savelow (McLaren Vale), The Other Wine Co (Adelaide Hills).