



The big squeeze

With much of this year's grape pick over, the reality of the grape glut is sinking in for many growers.

I've seen publicans pull some clever tricks, but this was a first. Name one who can pull you a beer, get you settled, duck outside and return within a couple of minutes with bunches of his own grapes. Two varieties. Two vineyards. Two regions.

That's Doug Govan at the mighty Victory on Sellicks Hill. One foot in Southern Fleurieu; the other in McLaren Vale. Beautiful grapes: thick-skinned malbec; nicely shrivelling mataro. Ready to go.

"We're making it at Justin McNamee's. Samuel's Gorge. Near Chapel Hill", he says.

The vineyards sandwich his pub, squeezing it comfily on the ridge there above the Gulf. In the face of such an infamous glut, how could anybody possibly be standing there grinning about launching a new brand?

Dougie's lucky. The wineries are full now, and there are many who simply cannot find a place to squeeze anything. Not many smiles around elsewhere. One bloke at the bar winced and cursed when he saw those two bunches. They reminded him of the dread reality he faced on his home patch.

Those boofheads who, against all good sense, decided to go for the tonnage, and let the tap run, are being butchered by this late cool damp. They may never get their grapes properly ripe, let alone squeeze them in anywhere - as in pay somebody to take them.

I've seen many Hills vineyards tuned for six to eight tonnes an acre that fit this category.

Getting money back for grapes? Many growers are discovering, for the first time, that that bit simply doesn't always happen. No more guarantees.

The marketplace is terribly tight, from the vineyard dirt right through to the spitbucket. It's unsettling to be in the middle like this: I do my regular vintage tricks, jumping the fence here and

there to munch grapes; arriving at wineries, unannounced, in the middle of the night. Looking, looking.

To one end of my desk comes the new releases from 2004 and '05 with their press kits. Over-familiar, almost intimate scribbles from the flak Jacintas, boasting about the inclusion of 11 per cent of blanc this or gris that in the blend to give the wine that extra layer of, er, synergy, when the day before I've been in the vineyard with the poor bloody grapegrower, and know full well the winery has just told them they won't be taking that same bloody buzz grape this year.

No thanks for growing the damn stuff for them, for taking the risk. No explanation.

And then there's the bit I knew had to happen eventually. Having delivered the bad news over and over for months, having completely convinced everyone that their grapes and their contracts are cactus, some wineries have had to eventually admit that they do actually need to buy some grapes to make the 2006 vintage, so they'll call at the last minute, when the sugars are too high for comfort, offer you a pittance, and ask you to pick. Now.

But all the pickers are busy picking elsewhere. So there's going to be a lot of sweet, over-alcoholic jam on top of everything else.

Around the Barossa, before the cool snap, sugars were soaring. Fifteen and a half, sixteen. I visited growers who were so jinxed and hypnotised by the terrible reality of their family business collapsing that they simply forgot to go out and check their sugars.

Some have found the cool and the rain a blessing. Everything slowed down. Acids began to fall, but sugars may hold long enough for the wineries to make some space while the pickers find time to come around and get it off.

But, as usual, there are those with balanced vines set for modest crops in appropriate regions who picked before the change with grand natural acids, good mouth feel and consistent ripeness of juice, pips and skins, reasonable sugars and reliable contracts. The stalwarts.

I went with Susanna Fernandez and Duncan Fergusson of Cascabel to check the High Eden vineyard which supplies their stunning riesling. Dry-grown, perfect vital statistics. I gradually realised I'd been there before, but had approached from the other direction. Yep. It was with Adam Wynn, when he used that fruit for the Mountadam rieslings in the early '80s. Way back in another boom time. It's still beautiful stuff.

Which brings us again to Doug Govan. The Victory's continuing to kill it. The festival, the car rags, all the disco happening in the city hasn't made a dent in his business. Always booked out. Unlike those hundreds of growers reeling at the cost of making and packaging a brand of their own, then facing the impossibility of finding someone to buy it, Dougie's sitting pretty, with his steadfast audience hanging out for a taste.

I reckon he'll be selling his wine to himself at a fair price.

You can still do it, see.

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