U3A CASTLEMAINE WINE APPRECIATION GROUP
SOME THOUGHTS ON FUTURE WINE TASTINGS

Whereas our WAG tastings are highly enjoyable, social meetings, we do need to remind ourselves that, since this a **course**, we should structure our tastings to maximize our understanding of the wines' characteristics that are being presented.

I've convinced myself that the most useful way to increase learning and appreciation of wines is to eliminate as many **variables** as possible in the wine selections.

The main variables are: country of origin, region, age, *terroir* (growing conditions, including soil composition and rainfall), grape type, maker, winemaking method – and price.

So, to take an extreme example with multiple variables, eight wines made from a selection of different grapes, by different makers, from various parts of the country, and from different years, won't help us to understand what we like, or don't like, or what makes a good or bad wine!

The challenge, then, is to select wines such that the number of variables is as few as possible. With that in mind, here are some suggestions for future tastings:

Vertical tastings. In other words, all the variables are eliminated, except for the year of vintage, and possibly rainfall at the vineyard. So we have eight wines made from the same grape(s), by the same maker, from the same vineyard, by the same method, but from different years. We learn what happens when this wine (and others of similar provenance) ages. Vertical tastings are, unfortunately, not easy to organize, as winemakers can't usually make every vintage available.

Horizontal tastings. When most variables are eliminated except for maker, manufacturing method, region and possibly terroir. So we choose wines either from the same or differing region, but we keep the year, grape type, wine style, and preferably price, the same. We learn which winemakers are "better" than others, and which regions produce the "best" wines - in our opinion.

Best of style tastings. We learn from various sources which region(s) produce the best examples of specific wine styles. For example, if we follow James Halliday's recommendations, as many do, we would assume that the Barossa Valley make the best Shiraz styles, Eden Valley or Clare the best Rieslings, the Hunter region the best Semillons and so on. So from an educational standpoint, it would be useful to choose eight of these as benchmarks. Again we would

eliminate, so far as possible, the effects of price and year of vintage. And a tasting such as this would be a great precursor to a blind tasting some time later…

Showcase tastings. Whilst the above suggestions apply mainly to Australian wines, there is much interest in overseas wines. But it would be impractical, or impossible, to replicate the principles suggested above with imported wines. So we fall back to the idea of *showcasing* what a specific country is capable of producing, particularly if we choose the "best" or more famous wines of that country's various regions. We learn what overseas producers can do, either with familiar or unfamiliar grape varieties. Already this year, Spanish and Chilean wines have been presented, and there are many other countries worth investigating.

 Comparison tastings. We're seeing an increasing number of wines made in Australia from non-traditional grapes, especially those from Italy. There are, for example, four wines made in Australia using Italian grapes with a Halliday rating of 96. So a further wine-tasting theme would be a *comparison* between wines made in the originating country with those made here from the same grapes. In this case we could keep the grape, age and perhaps price constant, but the key variable is of course country of origin. Such tastings could be tricky to organize, but an exercise well worth considering, so long as we remain impartial.

Best In Show tastings. We are all aware of 'prize-winning wines', as these are an important part of the winemakers' promotional arsenal. But what do they mean? I would argue that a "Best Red of the Show" at the Upper Pudlington Wine Show means a lot less than a similar trophy at, say, the Melbourne Wine Show. But we can learn from these experienced judges by tasting the top, or second-tier, wines from important Shows held throughout Australia, comparing them to highly-rated wines from other sources, again keeping the number of variables as low as possible. The biggest problem is cost, since show-winning wines are always more expensive. We can't afford a Penfolds Grange!

Lastly, we can consider an **Options** game – which *is* a game but helps the learning process. Everybody first stands up. The presenter starts off by asking very general questions ("is this a red or white wine?"), gradually getting more precise, asking for a guess of the vintage ("is it pre-2010 or post-2010?") and whether or not the wine is a Cabernet Sauvignon or a Pinot Noir, for example. Those giving the wrong answer must sit down and are eliminated from the game until the winemaker and year (and possibly the grape variety) has been correctly deduced or until there is no one left in the game. We won't be trying out this idea for a year or two!

I hope these ideas are useful and that U3A WAG goes from strength to strength.

Cheers

John