

GEELONG WINE SHOW 2018

Speech by Robert Paul, Head Judge

For thousands of years, philosophers have pondered the great questions of human existence. What is the meaning of life? What does it mean to be morally good? And what, exactly, makes a fine wine? This is a question I will examine this evening.

Wine has a long history--we are pretty sure that viticulture and winemaking originated in the near east about 8,000 years ago. It seems likely that the area between modern-day Turkey, Iran and Iraq is the birthplace of wine or at the very least its cradle.

The culture of wine in Europe predates the Romans: in ancient Greece, wine was praised by poets, historians and artists, and was frequently referred to in the works of Aesop and Homer. Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, represented not only the intoxicating power of wine, but also its social and beneficial influences. He was viewed as the promoter of civilization, a lawgiver, and lover of peace — as well as the patron deity of agriculture and the theatre. Indeed, according to ancient Greek historian Thucydides, “the peoples of the Mediterranean began to emerge from barbarism when they learnt to cultivate the olive and the vine”.

And for the next two thousand years, wine became an integral part of the social fabric of the western world. It contributed significantly to trade-- there are records of wine shipments from Bordeaux to England from the twelfth century-- and to local economies.

In Burgundy we can see the notion of terroir and the superiority of some vineyard sites over others first come into being. The Benedictine and Cistercian monks over centuries laid the foundations of the Burgundy we know today. It was during this early era that the first reliable references to grape varieties in Burgundy were made. Pinot noir was first mentioned in 1370, but it was believed to have been cultivated earlier than that, since no other grape variety associated with Medieval Burgundy is believed to have been able to produce red wines of such quality.

On 6 August 1395, Duke Philip the Bold issued a decree concerned with safeguarding the quality of these Burgundy wines. The duke declared the "vile and disloyal Gamay"—which was a higher-yielding grape than Pinot noir in the 14th century, as it is today—unfit for human consumption and banned the use of manure as fertiliser. So over 700

years ago, the very same issues over which we argue today first came to prominence. In Burgundy it was clear that Pinot Noir produced a finer wine than Gamay.

But why is fine wine important? Why should we worry about which wines might be better than others? Is it enough simply to say well, I like this one so that's it, I'm not really interested in your views on whether it's any good or not.

Personally, I think in a culture of immediate consumption and instant gratification, wine has a wonderful ability to provide a range of types of stimulation. There are big, fruity wines that appeal to our desire to be overwhelmed with flavors while happily altering our state of consciousness. There are sweet wines, and crisp acidic wines that appeal to those sorts of desires. Like various forms of music and art—there is something for just about any taste. And this enjoyment arrives quickly--you may decide in the first few sips whether you like a wine or not. But that's only the beginning of the story.

Unlike most products that show us what they can be very quickly, wine has the ability to transcend the fleeting consumer experience. Mimicking our personal growth and a human need to go further, wine can echo a more deeply satisfying - intellectually stimulating - human need. So while we might arrive at our first pleasurable bottle simply having a good time, wine can provide us with entirely new levels of experience, of friendship and sharing, of insight and behaviour.

But can we define what makes one wine better than another and begin this journey of discovery? I believe there are right and wrong answers when it comes to wine quality and of course it is upon this statement that we base our entire wine show judging system.

Someone who thinks an unsophisticated wine is superior to a complex vintage is, quite simply, wrong—just as someone who insists Barry Manilow is a better musician than Bach is wrong. Philosopher Barry Smith puts it this way:

“Even if some people happen to like Barry Manilow better, we still think, ‘Yeah, but come on, there’s something that makes Bach superior as a composer and musician”.

And it is this something that drives us as wine judges.

Liking a wine that others dislike makes us wonder whether they taste it the same way we do and they just don't like that taste, or whether it tastes different to them. Wine judges need to push things further. If the way the wine tastes is different for different people, can there be such a thing as the inherent taste of the wine? If the answer is no, taste is subjective and just a matter of individual experiences. So can we ever really share the pleasure of this bottle? Can we judge wine objectively and rationally, given its apparent subjective nature?

Drinking good wine provides an occasion for pleasure, but it also provides an opportunity for thought. Taste invites reflection, as Voltaire says, and it is this tendency to think about what we drink that opens up common ground between wine show judges and wine drinkers.

And while all this may seem intimidating for the novice wine drinker, I have never yet seen a true wine lover belittle a novice for misunderstanding a wine. A true wine lover is only too happy to help guide others and most importantly to enjoy wine with others. There is no doubt in my mind that the real enjoyment of wine comes with sharing. I cannot imagine drinking a great bottle of wine alone--what a desperately sad act that would be. But drinking the same wine with friends enriches us all. In fact, strangers quickly become friends in this sort of environment when fine wines are being shared. We want to know more about this fascinating drink, we want to be able to understand it better and so we begin to judge it.

Now, being a fine wine critic is no different from being a critic of any other aesthetic endeavour, such as fine art. To be good at judging wine you need plenty of experience, to be free from prejudice, to know what to expect from each category of wine, and to be skilled at identifying the various flavours.

Many people are resistant to comparing wine connoisseurship to other forms of knowledge because they believe tasting is a simple experience. But in fact, tasting is a combination of many senses working together; it is not a singular event. First there's the experience as the wine enters the mouth and the way it changes as it travels across the palate. Swallowing passes the wine's various scents up to the nose and creates a big release of flavour at the back of the throat. Finally, there's the lingering taste that's left after you've swallowed.

And just as it's possible to misunderstand a piece of art, we can overlook flavours and characteristics of the wine we drink. Intellectual knowledge is important in wine tasting, just as it is with other aesthetic judgments. Your experience of a wine will be quite different depending on your

expectation and understanding of various categories of wine, such as Yarra Valley vs Barossa Valley.

But in the end, the higher qualities of superior wines mean that some wines are more worthwhile than others. And a fine wine by this definition is one that deserves our attention.

However, not every wine is worth this attention, just as not every piece of music or painting is worth our attention. It has to have enough complexity to interest you. To challenge you, to beguile you, to make you think more about it, to want to know more about it. That's what we mean by a fine wine.

And so to the fine wines of the 2018 Geelong Wine Show. It is a daunting task, being asked to judge so many wines--not just daunting physically but mentally as well, always in the background the notion that we are just recording a particular moment in time and in another place and time, these same wines may taste different. But we have been tasked to judge them here and now and we have done so. We were not disappointed and the best wines lived up to and even exceeded our expectations.

The highlight for the judges was Shiraz, closely followed by Pinot Noir and Chardonnay--no great surprise there you might say. True, but it continues the development of Geelong wine and brings us still closer to answering the great question about what is Geelong's best and most appropriate variety.

The most notable thing about the Shiraz entries, apart from their sheer quality, was their diversity. It was exciting to see how producers are adapting to vintage variation and site differences. As for Pinot Noir, I would add only one word of caution and that is to avoid recipe winemaking and be as alert as possible to the differences in each harvest that may require a change in approach, however subtle. Chardonnay was strong as expected although we noticed a lack of intensity through some of the 2017's, possibly due to overcropping. There were also one or two winemaking faults such as oxidation and sluggish fermentation that probably shouldn't be happening at this level. Pinot Gris or Grigio continues to provoke--I have some strongly-held views on this variety and expressed them perhaps too forcibly at the exhibitors tasting but it seems to me that the variety is only capable of so much. It doesn't feature in any list of the great wines of the world and so we should recognise it for what it is and give thanks for that but not expect it to provide the best wines in the Geelong wine show. It sells, consumers enjoy it and it works well in this region. That may be enough. Of course, there will be times when gold medals are awarded but they

won't be as frequent as in the Shiraz or Chardonnay classes. And lest I be accused of snobbery, let me say there were several wines in this class that I would happily drink. I just wouldn't award them a gold medal and my fellow judges felt the same.

We saw one excellent Riesling and a lovely Tempranillo that is not far off being a benchmark for the variety in this region. Also, the introduction of an experimental class this year opens up opportunities for non-mainstream styles. How to assess such wines becomes problematic and may require a new judging paradigm but that's a question for another time.

I have commented before about Cabernet and related varieties so I won't do so any further but my original comments stand. When judging in regional wine shows, it is always necessary to bear in mind the standard of wines that win golds and trophies at major capital city wine shows. In that light, the Geelong versions still fall short.

This was my final year of judging here and I would like to thank the show committee for their support and encouragement and their never-failing kindness. It has been an absolute pleasure to take part in this wine show.

And I will close with another historical reference, once again to the ancient Greeks who were known for the institution of the symposium. In ancient Greece, the **symposium** (from the Greek meaning to drink together) was a part of a banquet that took place after the meal, when drinking for pleasure was accompanied by music, dancing, recitals, or conversation. Notably, the wine was always mixed with water and/or honey for the ancient Greeks regarded drinking undiluted wine as barbaric and uncivilised.

In a play of the period, the god Dionysus is quoted with the following:

I mix three cups for the temperate:

One for health, which they empty first,

The second for love and pleasure,

The third for sleep.

When these cups are emptied, the wise go home.

The fourth drink is ours no longer, but belongs to violence,

The fifth to uproar,

The sixth to rudeness and insults,

The seventh to black eyes,

The eighth to the calling of the authorities,

The ninth to anger and depression,
And the tenth to madness and the hurling of furniture.

Speaking as one who has occasionally strayed beyond the recommended three cups, I encourage you to enjoy the wines of Geelong tonight. Taste them, think about them, discuss them, ponder on them, enjoy them where you can and above all, open your wallets to buy them.