

The Standard

China's Business Newspaper

King of Rieslings



Jeffrey Grosset's synonymous Polish Hill vineyard, Clare Valley, South Australia

Australian winemaker Jeffrey Grosset's approach to the concept of terroir gets Curtis Marsh excited.

Saturday, April 14, 2007

"Riesling wines are dramatic images of the places where they grew and the seasons during which the grapes ripened." So said Stuart Pigott, world authority on riesling after visiting Jeffrey Grosset in the Clare Valley, South Australia. "Grosset's wines are interfused not only with that sense of place and season, but with the spirit of Jeff Grosset, a phenomenon that occurs by a means that science has yet to explain," Pigott added.

It is acknowledged that Grosset is one the world's most respected winemakers, having recently been ordained by touchstone England-based Decanter Magazine which named him one of the top 10 white winemakers of the world. He was the only New World winemaker among a line-up of pre-eminent Europeans: Anne-Claude Leflaive, Egon Muller, Dominique Lafon, Ernst Loosen, Didier Dagueneau, Olivier Humbrecht, Pierre Trimbach. In 2005 Grosset was listed in Wine and Spirits Magazine (United States) as one of the 50 most influential winemakers in the world and in 1998 named International Riesling Winemaker of the Year at the Riesling Summit II, Hamburg.

In the same year, he was voted the Inaugural Volvo-Wine Magazine Australian Winemaker of the Year.

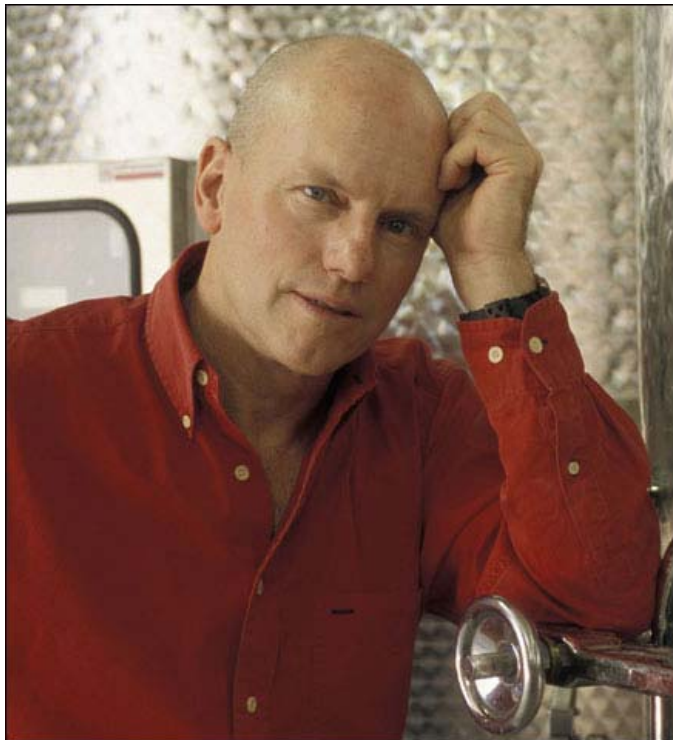
two wines. That was 26 years ago. Those differences, while seasonal variation does play its role, have shown up every vintage since," he explains.

"While less than six kilometers apart, the two sites are profoundly different, with variation in climate reflected in a slightly later ripening dates at the Polish Hill site. A more profound difference exists with the soil and rock profile at each site. The Watervale vineyard is a soft rock site (red loam over limestone), which is well-drained and has excellent water holding capacity, particularly relevant to vineyards without drip irrigation (as was the norm in the past). The Polish Hill vineyard is a classic hard rock site - shale, slate, sandy loam, clay and gravel."



**Left; Watervale soft rock site (red loam over limestone)
Right; Polish Hill hard rock site - shale, slate, sandy loam**

Grosset then introduced a fascinating picture of terra Australis terroir as defined by one of the oldest inhabitants of the Earth: "Known in Australia for thousands of years as pangkarra, an Aboriginal word that represents a concept which has no English translation but encompasses the characteristics of a specific place that is, the climate, sunshine, rain, geology and the soil water relations; this might well reflect the difficulty in translating such a concept, rather than the fact Aborigines were not known for their viticulture."



Jeffrey in winery

"Jeffrey Grosset's Polish Hill Riesling tastes as though the grape juice were made of water that was filtered through layers of glacial gravel, slate and shale - which, in fact, it was. Producing the terroir-driven Polish Hill riesling has for the past two decades been a journey toward enlightenment for Grosset," wrote Rod Smith (Master of Wine) in Wine and Spirits (US).

Pigott and Smith's erudite statements serve as a pertinent introduction to the compelling parable that Grosset delivered recently at the Nelson aromatics symposium. His presentation, titled "Return of the King," suggested "the king of varieties, whites at least, is making a comeback, and that Australia's reputation as a world class riesling producer (especially dry riesling) is strengthening."

Grosset's cerebral delivery camouflaged much of his razor sharp wit, being accustomed to his character; I sensed some valuable messages and humor were lost on the less attentive. Attempting a synopsis of his exhaustive presentation within the boundaries of this column, I have distilled what I believe is the most emphatic content - his views on the subject of terroir.

"First that the concept of the importance of place exists not just in Europe but applies equally in our countries (Australia and New Zealand). But it is up to us to use the knowledge from our experience to define those places that undoubtedly exist for great riesling to be produced," he opines.

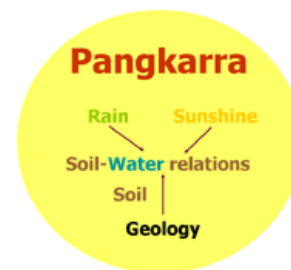
"Second, that a critical point in defining the relevance of site is whether you attribute the people-related aspects to terroir, or do you consider the human element as 'getting the most out of the site.' My opinion is clearly the latter."

While Grosset's views in his second point add credence to the adage, "great wine is made in the vineyard," there is clearly a profound message that the concept of terroir is inconsequential without the abilities or talent of the winemaker. What intrigued me most though was his first point, the contentious impression that the French have exclusivity over terroir. The concept of terroir is defined in the French language as the "total vineyard environment," however the marketing rhetoric always accentuates the geological merits - age of the soil and substrata with the vine roots reaching to the earth's core to extract precious minerals.

It is overlooked that the continent of Australia was forged at the beginning of Earth's formation in the Archaean period. The Australian landscape has some of the oldest rocks in the world (3.7 billion years old) and special rock "windows" that tell us about the geological age of the planet, and the origins of life. Much of Australia's ancient metamorphic crust has eroded over the passage of time with tectonic plate movements creating mountains and ranges, such as Mount Horrocks and the Clare Valley's U-shaped ranges.

Almost all the rock in the Clare Valley is of sedimentary origin, from a period between 800 and 500 million years ago, during the Neoproterozoic era. The receding oceans and glacial movements that linked Australia with Antarctica deposited silt, sand and carbonate in a largely marine sedimentary basin, forming chalk, limestone, sandstone and shale with top-soils rich in minerals.

Grosset produced his first two rieslings from the Clare Valley in 1981, a region already acknowledged for its outstanding rieslings. "The two wines



He stressed: "To get the concept of terroir it's important to think of all these attributes together rather than individually. In essence, a wine has a certain taste not just because of the variety and vineyard management but because of its place. I don't see winemaking as part of terroir but rather that poor winemaking can interfere with its expression and good winemaking can allow pure expression."

Grosset's approach to winemaking, application of technique, experience and technology has brought him to the top of his profession, although he shrugs off his reputation as an immensely disciplined winemaker with meticulous attention to detail at every stage. "To me it is really about getting a result, the clearest or purest expression of variety from that site. With essentially only one chance per year to do this it is important to keep it simple and learn quickly."

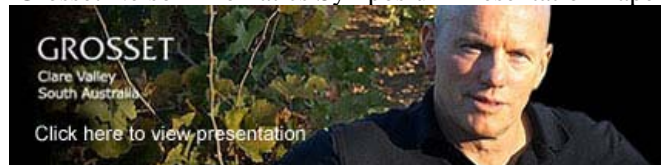
With an air of wisdom, Grosset contemplates, "I think the beauty of the Polish Hill and Watervale story is in its simplicity."

I tasted the 2005 Grosset Polish Hill Riesling among a line-up of six different countries, asking my colleagues at the table to pour the wines in my absence, wanting to taste the wines objectively, and curious to see if Polish Hill would stand out, and hopefully identify it.

It was the first wine I nosed and I immediately knew it was Polish Hill. My notes read: bouquet of clover fields, floral, lemon-dominant with a hint of lime, fresh-cut golden delicious apple, hay-straw characters, raw almonds, distinct chalkiness and wet slate. Racy, explosive lemony palate entry, coiled power unleashes and speeds across the palate with mouth-watering lemon and lime, chased by bracing and infinitely tangy acidity, crisp and bone dry with a chalky grip, mountain stream minerals and cold-wet slate, peppered with spicy glow. Breathtaking riesling with an ethereal pureness and poise.

The Jeffrey Grosset range is available in Hong Kong at Watson's Wine Cellar (Tel: 2525 1237; www.watsonswine.com). In Singapore through The Oaks Cellars (Tel: +65 6296 2111; sally@oaks.com.sg). UK agent, Liberty Wines Limited (Tel: +44 20 7720 5350 info@libertywine.co.uk) USA agent, The Australian Premium Wine Collection (www.tapwc.com.au)

Grosset Nelson Aromatics Symposium Presentation Paper



For an in-depth geology report on the Clare Valley go to: www.pir.sa.gov.au/byteserve/minerals/references/info-sheets/m49-web.pdf

For more on Jeffrey Grosset wine visit: www.grosset.com.au

To view his complete presentation "Return of the King," including slides, visit www.thewanderingpalate.com

Previous article covering Nelson aromatics symposium, go to www.thewanderingpalate.com/frameset_pa_mac_31.html

"Curtis Marsh, a veteran wine importer and sommelier, is an Asia-based writer on wine, food and travel."

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were to be blended but they were quite different and the blend as tried in the winery did not match the quality of the parts. The decision was to release



Jeffrey Grosset Watervale vineyard, Clare Valley

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