

# Variety gives spice to great whites

Balance, oaked or unoaked with crisp acids on the palate were the criteria used to assess the best drops in Australia

**T**he striking features of this year's annual review of the best in Australian white wines are the number of alternative varieties and rieslings that made the final cut through most of the four price categories.

It's not surprising that varieties such as savagnin, vermentino, pinot gris and viognier featured in the final line-ups because Australian winemakers have been dabbling in these for some years and are starting to achieve some pretty good things. Okay, they didn't exactly dominate but it is good to see some alternatives to the sea of blended whites and chardonnays out there.

The strength of the rieslings was largely due to the very good past couple of years in both South and Western Australia, the two States where this variety is done so well. WA in particular has produced some outstanding rieslings from 2010, with the delicacy and subtlety overlaid against the strong provenance of the Great Southern.

The thing about the rieslings I have selected is that not only are they all drinkable now but they

are also excellent cellaring wines. In some cases you could put these wines down for up to 20 years. If you're planning your summer drinking now, a case or two of riesling should be mandatory.

Blended whites, especially those from the South West of WA, were strong through all price points. A fairly recent development has been the greater use of oak in these wines to introduce a degree of complexity. The best of them show a subtle handling of oak so that the fruit is still the driving force in the wines.

These are wines you can drink immediately but which have been created with some short to medium-term cellaring in mind.

Of course there are plenty of very good unoaked blended whites that continue to provide relatively inexpensive drinking. In the main, I favour drinking these wines in the year of vintage while the lively fresh fruit characters are still to the fore, although in some cases you might want to leave them for a year or two. Your call.

Chardonnay is the one variety that has undergone a major transformation in recent years. And it had to because it was suffering against the aromatics, especially those sauvignon blancs

Gone are the big, fat, slightly flabby chardonnays of years ago with all that obvious oak. In their place are more fruit-driven, subtle, delicate and elegant styles which are finding favour once more with Australian wine drinkers.

Don't get me wrong, these chardonnays in the upper price categories are still sophisticated and complex wines of great style and intensity. It's more that in the lower price categories winemakers are pursuing a more pristine style. And it's working.

Unlike, previous years where I have included New Zealand wines, this tasting was restricted to Australian dry white wines. I figured there were so many really good Australian savvies and blended whites from the past couple of vintages that I would highlight more of these.

However, if New Zealand sav blanc is your bag then go for it. Just buy carefully and don't get conned by price. Spend a little more and you'll get a better wine.

The tasting was divided into price categories — under \$15; \$15.01 to \$20; \$20.01 to \$25 and \$25.01 to \$40. The prices for the individual wines included

all taxes with a standard mark-up. In the current environment you will almost certainly be able to find the wines a lot cheaper, so it pays to shop around.

I also asked those submitting wines to ensure they were widely available in Perth and country centres, and not exclusive lines for individual shops.

In assessing wines for this tasting I have applied my usual criteria. They have to be balanced, whether they are oaked or unoaked styles, and show good

varietal characters. I like to see nice crisp acids on the palate because it adds life and freshness.

Obviously my expectations change as I move up the price points. For instance I won't expect the same level of sophistication in the under \$15 category as I do in the \$25 to \$40 category, where the wines in addition to showing strong varietal integrity need to demonstrate a level of complexity that justifies the higher price.

**'Winemakers are pursuing a more pristine style. And it's working.'**



4 • THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2010

FRE

## Fresh Summer Wine Guide

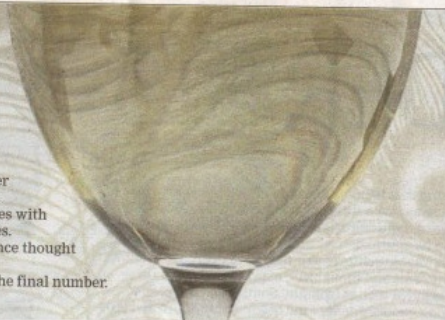
### \$15 to \$20

The blends were once more to the fore as they were in the under \$15 but in addition, there was a greater spread of styles and other varieties that provided some of the most interesting drinking in the tasting.

Riesling was very good. They are generally some of the most approachable and easily drinkable wines with appealing softness and flavours, albeit with that necessary acid to complete its thirst-slaking properties.

A number of other interesting varieties also crept in here, including savagnin, the variety that we once thought to be albarino, vermentino and colombar and, of course, chenin blanc and verdelho.

This was a strong category with the biggest number of entries, so it was challenging to get down to the final number. My top six for this category are pictured below.



#### Faber verdelho 2010 (\$17)

Another beautiful verdelho from Griffiths. I liked last year's but the slightly more restrained version from 2010 appeals even more. Has plenty of fruit intensity and a lovely pristine acid sustaining the finish. Palate feel and texture are features of an excellent wine.



wine RAY JORDAN



## warm regards

LIKE SO MANY warm climate regions, the Swan Valley has struggled for recognition against the more fashionable cooler-climate domains. One man who has done his best to fly the flag of the Swan Valley is John Griffiths.

As a forthright spokesman for the region, and as winemaker-owner of Faber Vineyard, he has proudly stood up with his Swan Valley-based wines to prove what can be done with well-managed vineyards, quality fruit and meticulous winemaking.

Griffiths is a hard taskmaster in all facets of producing top-notch wines and the result is a range that expresses the often-forgotten virtues of the Swan Valley, along with other wines from varieties that benefit from the cooler southern vineyards.

A recent tasting of his Reserve shiraz, from the first in 2001 through to the 2011 which is still in barrel, showed perfectly how this variety can work in the Swan Valley.

The current-release 2008, which I have previously featured in this column, was outstanding and will probably end up being the best to date.

Another red is the Riche shiraz, sourced from Griffiths' own vineyard and another nearby, and like the Reserve, reveals stacks of intense ripe fruit flavours, although in a more forward and opulent style.

For the first time this year, Griffiths has released a liqueur muscat, once one of the staples of the Swan Valley. It's a blend of vintages from 2003 to 2006, with typical raisin and dense candied viscosity with ripe plum pudding richness.

Although Faber has its roots firmly set in the soils of the Swan, Griffiths sources other wines from down south. For instance, the new Dwellingup chardonnay and semillon are excellent refined wines that benefit from the cooler southern climate.

A trip to the Swan Valley to visit the Faber cellar door is well worth it.

## PICK OF THE WEEK

**Faber Vineyard Riche shiraz 2009 (\$24.50)**

Lifted notes of spicy vanillin oak overlay the generous plummy characters of the fruit. The palate has supple tannins with a certain granular character. The fruit shows a control and finesse you don't often get in the Swan Valley. It is a powerful, opulent wine that's designed to be more approachable as a youngster than the Reserve, which is drawn from more concentrated fruit. Ripe fruit, but there is not even a suggestion of over-ripe portiness. 94/100

**Perfect with** lamb shanks

**WIN A DOZEN OF THE BEST** Love your wine? Then you will love what's on offer from the West Wine Club, which aims to strike a balance between WA's fine wines and those from Australia's other great regions with its superb selections. The West Wine Club and West Weekend have a fabulous mixed case of wine plus Ray Jordan's Wine Guide, worth more than \$300, to give away. To enter, put your name, address and telephone number on the back of an envelope and send it to: West Wine Club Competition, GPO Box 2925, Perth, WA 6800 by 5pm Friday. For terms and conditions, see today's public notices. To find out more about the West Wine Club, visit [www.westwineclub.com.au](http://www.westwineclub.com.au).



**Faber Vineyard Dwellingup chardonnay 2010 (\$25)**

On the nose you get the immediate impression of a fine, tight young chardonnay. The palate shows light creamy nuances with a thread of spicy minerals and light citrus. An enticing texture holds a controlled, focused palate to a very long finish. Nice wine. 91/100

**Perfect with** chicken and leek pie



**Faber Vineyard Dwellingup semillon 2010 (\$19.80)**

Attractive floral notes on the nose with traces of lemon-dominated citrus character. The palate has a slightly waxy, oily character but with loads of flavour. Has been given a small amount of light barrel fermentation in Russian oak. Very nice wine. A tighter style than further south into Margaret River. 93/100

**Perfect with** lemon chicken



**Faber Vineyard Dwellingup malbec 2009 (\$25)**

Floral, leafy notes on the nose of this distinctive variety weave enticingly with a hint of black pepper. Silky smooth palate and an effortlessly long finish. Chalky tannins and powerful fruit ensure a long cellaring life. A variety that always impresses when it's used straight, as in this case. 92/100

**Perfect with** lamb kebabs



**Faber Vineyard liqueur muscat (\$50/375ml)**

This is the first release of liqueur muscat from Faber and it's a beauty. Rich and luscious, with dense concentration of flavour. Has typical viscosity and concentration with a fresh, lifted character. It's a blend of vintages matured in old oak. 95/100

**Perfect with** choccies