

Town & Country

Gentle Hands guide sweet grapes from vine to glass

By Julie Hartigan
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Julie Hartigan
words and pictures

In as little as six months, the grapes hand-picked in Hunter Valley vineyards today could be in the glass of a wine lover anywhere in the world.

It's harvest time throughout the region and vineyards are alive with the hopes of what the 2010 vintage will bring.

Weather conditions have ensured an early harvest across most Hunter vineyards, with all of the white grapes picked and crushed, and the last of the red grapes ripe and ready for picking.

At Brokenwood Wines at Pokolbin, chief winemaker PJ Charteris is playing the threatening skies off against the potential for more exciting flavours.

"While sugar levels have accumulated very, very quickly this harvest, we're still waiting for the flavours to develop so we're holding off on picking the reds," he said. "I'd rather wait for good tannin and flavour."

Semillon and shiraz are the main focus in the Hunter Valley but other varieties, including chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, are also produced in the region.

The process for making the wines is very different for whites and reds.

With the whites, the grapes are loaded into a hopper, gently shaken into a destemmer, chilled to 5C and then crushed in a press.

The juice is then pumped into a settling tank and left for 48 hours.

"During that time all the solids sink to the bottom and we can rack the crystal clear liquid ready for fermentation," Mr Charteris said.

Semillon grapes ferment in tanks for 14 to 20 days and chardonnays are transferred to oak barrels for wild yeast



EXPERT: PJ Charteris is the chief winemaker at the award-winning Brokenwood vineyard and, inset, some of the Brokenwood labels.

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- Brokenwood chief winemaker PJ Charteris

fermentation. Fermentation is over in about a month but the chardonnay is bottled for 10 months.

"Over that time you get a break down of the yeast cells and they release lots of flavour and texture-type components which are great for creating complexity, aroma, flavour and a soft mouth feel," Mr Charteris said.

Red grapes go through the same initial stages with the hopper, destemmer and chiller but they are not pressed; they are pumped directly to a fermentation tank.

"We keep the skins with the juice because it gives the wine the colour and flavour," Mr Charteris said. "And

we're very gentle; it's all about gentle extraction.

"We don't want to break up the skins and release too much bitterness."

Once fermentation is complete and the yeast has settled, the clear wine is ready for blending.

Brokenwood grows shiraz and semillon grapes at its Hunter Valley vineyard and has vineyards at McLaren Vale, Beechworth, Orange and Cananda. Growing pinot noir, chardonnay, pinot gris, shiraz, cabernet sauvignon and vignier.

All the fruit is hand-picked and trucked to the Hunter Valley vineyard for processing.

"One of the strengths of having vineyards in different regions is you can have different harvest times," Mr Charteris said.

Harvest is almost over in the Hunter, is just about to start in Cananda, Beechworth is about a month away and Orange is six weeks away.

"For us it's two-and-a-half months of fruit intake which makes it a long harvest," Mr Charteris said.

But the length of the harvest is nothing compared to the time it takes to produce the wine. For semillon varieties it is about six months from vine to bottle but "we do cellar some for four or five years before release to establish a good age character" and chardonnay and pinot noir take 12 to 14 months and then spend another six months in the bottle before being released.

Shiraz takes between 18 months and two years to go from vine to bottle and then sits on the shelf for another year before going on sale.

"It gives the wine a chance to grow into itself," Mr Charteris said. "It's like a child going through puberty; the wine settles and balances itself out."

During the long process the winemaker is constantly tasting the maturing product.

"It's very complex because there's so much going on at once," Mr Charteris said.

"At any one time there are 20 different wines doing different things."

Brokenwood expects to process 1000 tonnes of grapes during the harvest and produce up to 95,000 cases of wine representing about 22 varieties.

LIFELINE



Criticism builds a strong wine industry

When wine judges consider a line-up of entries, they are looking for technical excellence and conformity to style.

"Originally it was about improving the breed; helping wine makers improve by awarding good wines and giving critical feedback to wines that were not so good," Brokenwood chief winemaker PJ Charteris said.

"That has served Australia so well, with the overall quality well above most other countries. There are very few poor wines in Australia and our winemakers are technically very good."

Mr Charteris believes the wine show system still serves the industry well but could be refined to make it more useful for producers and consumers.

"We need to ensure diversity within Australian wines is recognised and celebrated and that regionality is appreciated and explored," he said.

Soil and weather give fruity drops their own distinctive flavours

Alcohol has a different character based on the vineyard where it grows and that character is determined by the soil and sunlight.

"Fruit characters will taste different from one vineyard to the next," Brokenwood chief winemaker PJ Charteris said.

"The French call it *terroir* and it literally means the character that you can smell and taste and feel in a wine that is distinct because of the site it comes from."

He said the most important factor was the soil, and what backdrop that soil came from, as well as the weather conditions: the level of rain and sunlight and how hot or cold the temperature reached.

"If you have the soil being the base and the climate being the second influence, the grape

vine becomes a conduit between those factors and the glass," Mr Charteris said.

"What you smell and taste is the vine's translocation of the earth and atmosphere."

"As a winemaker you guide that process along."

While all grapes have their own *terroir*, some are easier to recognise than others.

"Some wines are so distinctive that when someone puts a glass in front of you, you can smell it and taste it and you know exactly where it comes from," Mr Charteris said.

Mr Charteris believes Brokenwood's Graveyard shiraz is a perfect example.

"It's very distinctive and representative of its own *terroir*," he said. "It's quite easy to pick."



UNIQUE: PJ Charteris is guided by *terroir*.