

Wine Foot Stomping the Snob out of Wine

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Featuring: Hunter Semillon

By Lester Jesberg

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It's just past noon on a sunny Sydney day. A gentle sea breeze cools and refreshes the air. A waterside luncher has just decided on natural oysters followed by grilled John Dory. The glib wine server suggests a Marlborough sauvignon blanc, but our diner knows better, and opts for a young Hunter semillon. That scenario is not nearly as common as it should be. The very overt fruit of the New Zealand wine would dominate the delicate seafood. Hunter semillon is a logical choice in such circumstances. Allow me to explain why.

Hunter semillon is one of the world's great dry white wines. Burgundy has chardonnay, Austria's Wachau has riesling, Sancerre has sauvignon blanc, and all can delight the senses, but just as they are unique, so is semillon from the Hunter Valley, it demands more understanding than chardonnay, riesling or sauvignon blanc. In the world of wine it is an enigmatic character, shy and retiring in its youth, but much more expansive, gregarious and sophisticate as it matures. That's the total opposite to sauvignon blanc which reaches its peak as a young party animal and quickly becomes a weary uninteresting adult.

Semillon, in its early reticent phase, should not be spurned. Seafood dishes like oysters, sashimi and simple grilled whiting or garfish require partners that don't dominate relationships. Chardonnay and sauvignon blanc tend to be wines of considerable flavor, and are better suited to more robust fish and poultry dishes. Young Hunter semillon, with its subtle flavor and racy acidity, is a perfect match.

... Winemaking

Modern semillon is fermented in temperature-controlled, closed stainless steel tanks, a far cry from the days of Maurice O'Shea and earlier where ice had to be used to cool open ferments. This ability to control fermentation temperatures changed the style of Hunter semillon in the 1960's. The two most famous producers, McWilliams and Tyrrells, created their famous semillons, Elizabeth and Vat 1 respectively, in that period. Brokenwood, a medium-sized winery, has become a major player in quality Hunter whites.

Because Hunter semillon is usually fermented in inert vessels, it is able to show the influences of soil, weather and viticulture very clearly. Another reason Hunter semillon retains its purity is that it is bottled only a short time after vintage. Most semillons are in glass and under screw-cap by the end of July, only 4-5 months after the grapes were crushed. This ensures freshness and wines that are bursting with varietal and regional identity. The influence of wood can blur vineyard character. Hunter semillon does not respond well to barrel fermentation, rather, it develops complexity in bottle, and its naturally high acidity is the basis of both structure and longevity.

...The Seal

Nearly 100% of Hunter wine makers have chosen to seal their Semillons with screwcap. Wines under cork can vary alarmingly from bottle to bottle, depending on the amount of air each

individual stopper allows to enter. The older the wine, the more obvious the variation becomes. Corks can also be tainted, and in such cases impart unpleasantly musty aromas and flavours to wine. Without doubt, screwcap is the best seal because it ensures freshness and consistency from bottle to bottle. It has also been clearly demonstrated that wines age evenly and gracefully under screwcap.

...Aging

Truly great wines of the world reach their apogee through evolution in bottle. Hunter semillon is no exception. From the restrained, acidic, pale, green-tinged young wine grows a golden marvel. Over a ten or twenty year period semillon develops a richness that is quite profound. Often referred to as 'honey and toast', the flavours fill the mouth and are entirely satisfying. The ability of Hunter semillon to grow into a superb, multi-faceted dry wine has drawn lavish praise from some of the world's most eminent wine authorities.

Consider the following:

'Hunter Valley semillon is Australia's unique gift to the wine world'

Jancis Robinson MW - jancisrobinson.com

"Hunter Valley semillon is Australia's greatest white wine"

Matt Kramer - Wine Spectator

...Viticulture

Although much of the semillon is grown on alluvial flats, there are variations in soil. Tyrrell's HVD is one of the sandiest vineyards I've ever trod upon, and it consistently produces wines that Bruce Tyrrell describes as 'doughy - you know - like a Scotch Finger biscuit that has been dipped in a glass of water.' Brokenwood's Iain Riggs feels that the flats around the creeks produce wines with citrus and talc characteristics, while the darker soils give rise to aromas that relate more to vanilla. Opinions like those, from two of the leaders in Hunter winemaking, give some insight into the subtle complexities of young semillons.

My notes on young Semillons reveal descriptors such as lemon grass, fresh-mown lawn, hay, Sunlight soap, lemon zest, chalk, talcum powder, Granny Smith apple, vanilla and freshly-squeezed lime, all of which are positives - believe it or not. Earlier-drinking examples may be more appealing to those new to the variety because they are comparatively soft and fruity. The 'classic' austere young wines with higher apparent acid, typify the pinnacle of dry semillon and are less easy to understand.

It puzzles me that Hunter semillon isn't more popular. It's refreshingly delicate in the mouth and low in alcohol, yet hordes of consumers choose to drink coarse, neutral pinot gris wines which are much more alcoholic. Hunter semillon may be poured as a pre-meal aperitif or served with a wide range of foods (depending on the age of the wine).

I fondly dream of the day when wine drinkers, *en masse*, celebrate Hunter semillon for what it is - Australia's finest dry white style...

It's just past 8:30pm on a starless European night a decade from now. The diner in a Michelin three star restaurant has just ordered broiled lobster with herb butter. The sommelier nods sagely as a bottle of ten year old Hunter semillon is requested.

Lester Jesberg

Stunning Summer Semillons from the Hunter

Brokenwood 2008 Hunter valley Semillon SRP\$20

Brokenwood 2007 Cricket Pitch Semillon Sauvignon Blanc SRP\$21

Brokenwood 2004 Oakey Creek Vineyard Semillon SRP\$32

Brokenwood 2003 ILR Reserve Semillon SRP\$48