A Vintage Silence?

It's finally been mentioned in the media (thanks to ALR contributor David McKnight, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald), but it's been an open secret for months: 1989 was the Australian wine industry's 'vintage of the decade'. The worst vintage of the decade, that is. But so close are the links between the nation's wine writers and the wine industry that the last people to find out were consumers.

One winemaker/industry figure/writer/judge who did actually break the silence was James Halliday, in an article in the British wine magazine Decanter. According to Halliday's article, tellingly entitled 'A sad silence descends over the vineyards', 1989 was 'a vintage to remember...for all the wrong reasons'. The main reason was a coincidence of climatic calamities in different parts of the country. In the Hunter Valley in NSW torrential rain before harvest resulted in a large crop of weak, diluted wines which will be best drunk early. In most parts of South Australia, by contrast, a heatwave before harvest will very likely result in over-alcoholic, blowsy reds to resemble the porty, sweetish Oz reds of yore.

Halliday's tale of woe, however, has one, perhaps dubious, ray of sunshine. He claims that the bright spot for winemakers was Victoria, and in particular what he glowingly refers to as 'Australia's Napa Valley', the Yarra Valley. However that selfsame Yarra Valley just happens to be the location of Halliday's very fashionable, and highly expensive, Coldstream Hills vineyards.

All the same, Halliday has not been loved by the wine industry/wine media duopoly for his frankness. And when questioned by the SMH, Australia's wine magazines played down the blight, arguing that technical know-how could nowadays override nature's whims.

But no amount of good winemaking can make up for diluted flavours and low alcohol - at least, not within the letter of Australia's winemaking laws. In France, and in particular in Burgundy, sugar is added ('chaptalisation') in the fermenting process to beef up weak wines by boosting their alcohol. But chaptalisation is illegal here - unlike a range of more dubious additives such as (in a recent rule change) oak shavings, which can be added to wines to simulate the taste of 'new oak casks' now so sought after by faddish wine drinkers.

So what should the poor old wine drinker on a limited budget do? Well, first of all, take advantage of the silver lining. Prices of 1989 Coonawarra, 5th Australia, and Hunter Valley wines in particular should be much lower than usual. The Hunter's Rothbury Estate, for instance, was flogging off its 1989 reds on mail order at cutthroat prices almost as soon as they were bottled (though without explaining why). If you like light, early drinking reds without lots of tannin this could be the way to go, although for whites it's a bit less attractive.

As far as South Australian wines go, avoid the 1989 Rhine Rieslings (high alcohol ruins their delicate, fruity character) and Shiraz (too porty). This is a problem for budget buyers, since they're the two best value varieties in Australia at present. Logic would suggest that the Chardonnays will be big and simple and perhaps almost sweet, which should suit those people who like the voughish hit-you-over-the-head style.

Straight Cabernet Sauvignons should probably be avoided young: blended reds might be a better bet, since the blending process can help create a balance from several different unbalanced grape flavours. Perhaps the simplest solution, however, is simply to avoid the 1989 reds from these areas altogether, and not to pay too much for whites, since they may not be worth it.

And Halliday's advice might not be without merit. The Yarra Valley is an exciting growth area for winemaking, even if a lot of the wines are grossly overpriced. Try one or two shortly after payday; Halliday's own Coldstream Hills is a good place to start. Western Australia's Margaret River and Mount Barker are still good areas for (pricey) reds and whites: Goundry Windy Hill and Leeuwin Estate are the frontrunners. And give a thought to Tasmania, where heatwaves are very rare indeed...

Home on the Grange

Another vinicultural event reported less than objectively by the wine press was the recent takeover of Lindemans by Penfolds, which now gives the latter a commanding (in wine terms) 30% of the market. Now, for wine drinkers this is certainly not all bad news. Wynns reds - notably their well-priced black label cabernet - have improved markedly since Wynns was taken over by Penfolds a few years ago, and Penfolds do have a reputation of preserving the character of their smaller subsidiaries.

All of this has been amply stated in the wine press. What hasn't is that Lindemans Hunter River whites and reds are generally much under-priced, and Penfolds' plan will undoubtedly be to market them heavily at a higher, more 'exclusive' price. (Such is the thinking of the well-to-do wine buyer that under-priced quality wines often find it hard to get a market.) This has to be bad news for the impecunious consumer. Perhaps now is the time to buy up a case of Lindemans Hunter River 'Chablis', 'White Burgundy' or Semillon (all actually the same grape) at around $8 a bottle on special. Hide them under the house for two or three years, and sample the delights of aged Hunter semillon while you can still afford it...