

History of Durif in Rutherglen

The late 1800's were golden years for Rutherglen. The district was the centre of a large and flourishing wine industry. Substantial wineries were built and by 1892, 350 vignerons were making wine within a 56km radius of the town. The wines were received enthusiastically in Europe, with some winning medals in the popular Great Exhibitions of the time.

As the century drew to a close the winemakers of Rutherglen must scarcely have dared to consider the depressing implications of phylloxera. This virtually indestructible vine aphid was first discovered near Geelong more than twenty years earlier and its inexorable march northwards was detected in Rutherglen in 1899. The impact on the district's wine industry was profound. Thousands of hectares of vines were lost to the debilitating effects of the aphid, dramatically reducing yields over just a few short years and eventually forcing hundreds of growers out of the industry.

Just as the problems seemed insurmountable, help was on its way. In 1908 Francois de Castella, recently returned from a study tour in Europe, was appointed Viticulture Expert for Victoria. de Castella learnt new grafting techniques on his tour and also identified a number of promising new varieties that appeared to have potential in Australia; one of these was Durif.

Confident with new viticultural practices introduced by de Castella, the small band of growers that remained gradually replaced their vines with varieties grafted to American rootstock, which is resistant to the depredations of phylloxera. Durif was one of the varieties planted, one of the few wine districts – indeed perhaps the only one – to embrace this unknown variety. By 1925 the wine industry was considered fully recovered, with vineyard areas and production back to pre-phylloxera levels, but with a greatly reduced number of operational wineries.

While the Rutherglen district has experienced its fair share of economic fluctuations over the years two things have remained constant – our gratitude to de Castella's crucial role in re-building the district's wine industry, and the inspired introduction of Durif to the region, now the district's pre-eminent variety.

Origin of Durif

Durif is a relatively new variety, released in 1880 by Dr Francois Durif, a grape nurseryman with an experimental vineyard in southern France, who named the variety after himself. It grew from a seed he extracted from fruit of the old French variety Peloursin. Durif didn't know the pollen source at the time, in fact it remained a mystery until 1998 when DNA paternity analysis methods similar to those used with humans confirmed it was Syrah (aka Shiraz). So Durif is the unintended offspring of a cross-pollination between Peloursin and Syrah, which means it received half of its genes from each of these varieties.

Peloursin is a very old French variety from the Iserre region of France, on the east side of the Rhône River. Syrah is the ancient noble variety from which the great Northern Rhône wines of Côte Rôtie and Hermitage are made.

The variety was introduced to California in 1884 where some growers referred to this low yielding type of Syrah as 'Petite Syrah', the other name commonly used for Durif in some parts of France. By 1900 this had morphed into 'Petite Sirah', a name used for several varieties in California at the time, but most of it was probably Durif.

Australia and California have the largest known plantings of Durif/Petite Sirah. The variety never gained prominence in France.

Rutherglen Durif Producers

There are 9 members of the Durif group: All Saints Estate, RL Buller & Son, Campbells, Chambers, Cofield, Morris, Mt Prior, Rutherglen Estates and Stanton & Killeen.

Climate and soils

Rutherglen lies in undulating countryside, where the soaring mountains of Australia's Great Dividing Range meet the fertile plains of the Murray River. Hilltops of quartz gently fall away to bands of well drained red loam on the lower slopes. It is here that the vines for Rutherglen's flagship red wine are grown.

Rutherglen has a continental climate, characterised by long, dry summers stretching lazily into dry autumn weather, ideal ripening conditions that allow the Durif fruit to develop the hallmark intense colour and rich flavours.

The vine

Great fruit is the heart of great Rutherglen Durif. For this reason the wineries lavish care and attention on the vines to achieve the desired balance of ripeness, tannin and acids in the fruit when it comes to harvest time.

Differences in individual viticultural practices also go a long way to explaining why there are so many differences between the various Rutherglen Durifs. Variations in viticultural management practices such as winter pruning, managing the vine canopy in summer, soil related factors and cutting away grape bunches to concentrate the vine's energy, are just some of the factors that have an impact on the profile of the fruit that goes into the winery every vintage.

Winemaking

This is where the science and art of winemaking intersects in a fusion of creativity that delivers the quirky 'red wine with attitude' individuality between the various house styles.

Here the winemaker has a range of options available including closed or open fermenters, the time the wine spends on skins to extract additional colour and tannins, the choice of oak type for barrel maturation and time in barrel.

The greater presence of natural grape tannins in some Rutherglen Durifs is made possible by the small berry size, providing a greater percentage of skin surface in relation to the overall mass of the berry compared with other red varieties. The choice of winemaking techniques has a deep influence on the resulting wine.

At one end of the spectrum is the more traditional style having a deep, almost impenetrable colour, with earthy, plummy aromas, a full palate displaying ripe berry fruit flavours and a firm tannic finish. At the other end of the spectrum is the more subtle Rutherglen Durif, still delivering great depth and richness on the palate but with a less pronounced tannic finish.

Cellaring Rutherglen Durif

Young Rutherglen Durif wines are an ideal choice for cellaring, displaying all the attributes necessary for successful ageing: a balanced structure of fruit flavours, fruit and oak tannins, natural acidity plus mid palate weight.

The optimum age to enjoy Rutherglen Durif is when the wine is showing some complexity from bottle ageing but still retains some primary fruit vibrancy.

Naturally, cellaring potential varies according to the individual house style and between vintages however, as a guide, wines with five years careful maturation can be opened and enjoyed with confidence.