

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 19 September 2014

In June 2010 the newly formed Grenache Association - essentially a partnership of a few interested producers in and around the southern Rhone valley in France - hosted a symposium whose avowed purpose was to create enhanced awareness about the variety. Until the 1980s, grenache had been the world's most widely planted variety. Now it was being grubbed up in favour of cultivars whose names were better known to supermarket wine buyers.

Speaker after speaker stressed the versatility, the intrinsic quality and the commercial potential of the cultivar. There was a sense of the high priests preaching to the converted: if all this was so obvious, why was it even necessary to host the symposium? The answer - of course - is that sometimes the short-term demands of fashion force growers to take poor long-term decisions. It doesn't matter how good the intrinsics of a variety: if the trade isn't interested in it, commercial logic will trump viticultural commonsense.

The 2010 Grenache Symposium was well-timed: it was already evident that the globalisation of taste had produced an undesirable homogeneity across the world of wine. Until the early 1980s the grape varieties which flourished in major appellations had a long-established history of yielding sound wine under the climatic and viticultural conditions of that region. They had been selected by growers primarily because they were likely to yield an optimum quality, commercial crop in most vintages. Now chemical sprays and industrial vineyard management strategies reduced the dependence on site-appropriate varieties. This coincided with supermarket buyers trimming their shopping lists to a few preferred cultivars. Cabernet, merlot, shiraz, chardonnay, and sauvignon blanc were 'in.' Pretty much everything else was 'out.'

The traditional plantings of the sound but uninspiring regions close to the major markets were grubbed up and replaced with varying combinations of whatever of these major cultivars could be farmed in these particular sites. A broad swathe of southern France suddenly became the largest single tract of merlot in the world. In parts of Australia new chardonnay vineyards exceeded the total national chardonnay plantings of two decades previously. South Africa was not exempt from this process: in the late 1970s our most widely planted red variety was cinsaut. Today there are fewer than ten producers bottling it as a single varietal wine, and the total vineyard area dedicated to it has declined from 13% in 1979 to 2% today

It's not entirely clear when boredom set in, but by the late 1990s evidence began to emerge of a consumer-led rebellion. ABC - "anything but Chardonnay" - became an oft-repeated refrain which in time came to symbolise a disenchantment with the very ordinariness of these amorphous wines. Slowly regional nuance began to replace varietal familiarity - at least in the middle and upper price ranges.

The Grenache Association launched itself into what was already a sympathetic environment. The Rhone began usurping Bordeaux as the more commercially acceptable red wine benchmark. Its traditional varieties - grenache, syrah/shiraz, mourvedre and viognier - caught the interest of the trade. In fact, by 2010 it was becoming clear that demand for shiraz and viognier was tapering off. Grenache offered a useful blending partner, a place to bury increasingly unfashionable shiraz in Rhone blends which were suddenly a la mode. There was still enough of it about in Southern Europe and Australia - much of it old vineyard yielding subtle but concentrated fruit - for the variety's

renaissance to be assured.

In South Africa the situation was slightly different: there was very few old vines, but these were tracked down by the producer avante-garde and used to make super-premium wines. This in turn encouraged new plantings: in the past ten years the number of wines in which grenache is a blending component has increased from single figures to over 100. Today - 19 September - is international Grenache Day. It's as good a Friday as any to choose one for your dinner.