

Thank you to the committee for inviting me to judge the show and to the winemakers of Geelong for providing the entries that made our two days of judging so enjoyable.

It is my belief that the role of wine shows is first to improve quality and to promote the making of good wine. Marketing opportunities come second, especially in regional shows.

Unfortunately, it seems that the capital city shows have completely surrendered to marketing departments so much so that they are happy to ignore their customer base and pursue what they think is best for them--exhibit A, the cynical selling of surplus wine exhibits by Sydney wine show to Cracka wine auctions without informing or consulting the exhibitors. These bloated capital city shows have ignored their obligation to improve and educate. Instead, they have become slaves to fashion both in the selection of judges and in the wines they promote.

So this important role of quality improvement and education falls to regional shows and I suggest we are at a pivotal moment when regional shows can become the most important and relevant wine shows in Australia. Regional shows must grasp this role of education and improvement by continuing to innovate and by understanding how they can help their exhibitors to make better wine.

And the exhibitors also must take part in this. Do not let the show become only a marketing tool. Use it to see how you can improve your wines. Yes, the judges scores are important but more important is the opportunity to benchmark your wines against your competitors and to see how other winemakers approach varieties and seasons.

We live now in what I call the Era of Wine. Wine is everywhere--believe it or not, there are still functioning vineyards in Syria and Finland is now a member of the European wine producing community. Unfortunately, this has led to a perception that wine should be treated like all other beverages. There is a trend to downplay the worth and quality of wine and this by the very people who should be doing the opposite. This deliberate barbarism results in the rise of relativism, the downgrading of a value system for wine and ushers in the cult of personality, with the abandonment of shared experience and objectivity. Relativism, when you espouse to be seeking the best, makes no sense whatsoever.

Get over it, it's just a drink is what you hear. But let's be clear--wine is not just a drink. To suggest that it ignores hundreds, if not thousands, of years of history. Wine is a fundamental part of western civilisation and it is impossible to think of the last two thousand years of world history without realising the importance of wine as a civilizing force, as a medium of exchange, as a religious sacrament and much more.

This deliberate downplaying of wine's value and quality threatens us all. As producers, we know that wine is not like other alcoholic beverages. To suggest that it plays into the hands of wine's enemies--the anti-alcohol lobby, the beer and spirit producers and the wowsers. We need to state very clearly that wine is not just a drink. Otherwise, why are we here tonight?

These reflections were brought on by a disturbing trend I see in wine show judging and in wine writing--that young wines are ipso facto better than older ones. Wine writers and judges applaud youthfulness as if they were the first to discover how fresh and invigorating a young wine can be. Older wines or wines that are made in the classic style, to improve with age, get short shrift in this

argument. But it is a one-sided argument--youthfulness in wine is not a quality attribute, it is simply a chronological one.

Accordingly the judges and I took pains to ensure we were not simply rewarding youth for youth's sake. We looked for wines of structure and depth and where it is relevant, for wines with the capacity for improvement

And we found them. The standard of wine in this year's show was exceptionally good. From a total of 185 entries, we awarded 14 gold medals, 34 silver medals and 58 bronze medals, a strike rate of 57%. Compare that to last year's tally of 13 gold, 21 silver and 47 bronze, a strike rate of 47%.

This tells me the winemakers of the Geelong region certainly know what they are doing and that 2015 was a very good season. The difficult part then comes from different seasonal conditions. This was particularly apparent in the 2016 wines, especially the Sauvignon Blancs and Rieslings, grapes that rely on aromatics and crisp acidity. While these wines were good, they lacked the fruit drive, intensity and acidity of the best examples from other areas.

We noted a positive trend in the appearance of barrel-fermented Sauvignon Blanc styles and support this approach which can provide a structural backbone to an otherwise potentially flimsy grape. I encourage the region's winemakers to fully investigate the potential of thiol management in Sauvignon Blancs. There are many techniques and strategies available from fermentation temperature to yeast selection that may help lift the final quality.

Sparkling wines showed quality and flavour but the judges are convinced that great sparkling wine takes time--perhaps we were over-critical in our judging but the difference that extra time on lees can bring would push the best wines here from silver to gold award. And while I acknowledge that I don't have to pay the bills for this extra storage time, it can be the difference between very good and great wine.

Rose is always an interesting class to judge. Here we have the nexus between commercial reality and quality. While the judges may prefer a drier style, the cellar-door customer often prefers a sweeter one. This brings about a dilemma for both producer and judge. And it may be the case that the best awarded wine may be the hardest to sell and vice-versa. The solution, once again and as always, is balance.

The Pinot Gris/Grigio classes produced some lovely, commercially relevant wines that just lacked that final degree of excellence. While exhibitors may think the judges were mean in their scores, we have to bear in mind the benchmarks that other regions and countries provide. I would recommend exhibitors look closely at wines from Tasmania to see what this variety can achieve.

We saw one excellent example of a blended white that did not rely on varietal character for quality. I was very taken with this wine which showed a composure and elegance that is uncommon in Australian winemaking. And perhaps it points the way to a future where varietal monomania is removed from our wine vocabulary.

The Chardonnay classes were, it almost goes without saying, excellent. The 2015's especially were rich, generous and full of flavour--a refreshing change from some of the enervated, tightly-wound examples we see from other regions of Victoria. And this is exactly as it should be-- Chardonnay is at its best when it is generous, rich, even flamboyant...nobody buys Grand Cru white burgundy

expecting a thin, lean wine. I encourage the consumers amongst you to seek out these 2015's. You will not be disappointed.

Pinot Noir remains an enigma. While we saw some great examples, I had the feeling that the best is yet to come from this variety. While there is no doubting the potential of the variety in the Geelong region, we looked hard to find the "peacock's tail" in these wines--that elusive, expansive finish that flows over the palate and lingers in the memory. The challenge for the winemakers here is how to get length and lasting flavour in their wines. All the other parts are in place--intelligent use of stalks, avoidance of over-extraction and a generally sympathetic use of new oak.

I am happy to say there is no enigma about Shiraz, except perhaps which sub-region does it best. I am not going to attempt to answer that question but simply say that there were some world-class wines on show here. It's such a refreshing change to see wines of intensity and concentration without excessive alcohol or heaviness. My only caveat is for winemakers to monitor carefully the amount of new oak used. We saw some otherwise excellent wines that had an unnecessary overlay of expensive French oak--why hide that beautiful fruit under a thick coat of make-up?

And finally, the Bordeaux varieties. These were in general, beautifully made wines with real personality. What impressed most was the lifted fruit aromas and silky palate structure on several examples. However, the judging panel had a low threshold for green fruit flavours and consequently the wines were scored down in the final analysis.

To conclude, thank you once again for the opportunity to judge the Geelong Wine Show and I would deem it a great honour if I was invited again next year.

Now before I leave, one further piece of information--I have another role as director of the Victorian Wines Show and in that role I am very pleased to announce the establishing of a reciprocal arrangement between this show and the Geelong Wine Show. This involves the awarding of scholarships to promising candidates to take up associate judging positions in the respective shows. This year, the Geelong wine show committee has chosen Natasha Webster from del Rios wines to join us in Nagambie in a few weeks to participate in the Victorian Wines show. Congratulations, Natasha and we look forward hosting you at our show.

Thank you and enjoy the wines of Geelong.

**Robert Paul**

**Chief Judge, Bendigo Bank Geelong Wine Show**