

(one bottle)

2005 SUTTON GRANGE SYRAH

Terroir wines of some grandeur



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THE OCEANS cover 80 percent of the southern hemisphere, and the natural loneliness of southern-hemisphere winemaking is intensified in Australia by the vastness of the distances that often separate vineyards or vineyard areas. There are long-established exceptions to the rule, but many here work in disconcerting isolation from both colleagues and markets, driven to distraction by flies, drought, and moonlight. This may be the nearest winemaking ever gets to the legendary blank sheet of paper confronted by novelists and poets. The vines are planted, of course, and will deliver fruit, but how exactly do you help them do that? And what next?

One of the great but necessary challenges at that point is what we might call the “unimagining” of European wine. Not as inspiration—that’s vital. Nor in terms of practices and techniques—that would be folly. But held aloft as models to be imitated or followed, it often seems to me that European wines are profoundly unhelpful for aspiring southern-hemisphere fine-wine makers. Because of their long antecedence, there is a sense that Europe’s great wines somehow represent the entire gamut of possibilities for all wines. In fact, they are just the latest outcome in a long series of human grapplings with a particular plant in certain places. They are the way they are... but they could have been otherwise.

Most European wines are shockingly strange to those tasting them initially; it is only time and use that render familiar those challenging aromas and flavors. The great wines of the southern hemisphere, I suspect, may need to shock and disconcert at their first appearance, too. The plants are not new, of course, so some element of familiarity is inevitable; but the places are new, and a sincere approach to rendering those places into aroma and flavor must result in something initially strange and confronting. We tasters and drinkers owe them our open palates.



Andrew Jefford

After that, evolution and the market step in. The propitious places for this activity endure, and the initial singularity of the wines made there comes to seem reassuringly familiar and eventually beautiful. Vineyards in less suitable sites disappear. But those wines made in the southern hemisphere against the grain of their being, simply to conform to a market need or to imitate in some way a pre-existing aesthetic model, are doomed to failure. They won’t give either their plants or their places a fair go.

Among the hundreds of wines I have tasted since arriving in Australia, none has struck me as more original in this sense than the wines of Sutton Grange. The vineyard is isolated, sitting alone under the granite mass of Mount Alexander in Bendigo’s former goldmining country. The vines weren’t planted until 1999, by Melbourne-based owner Peter Sidwell, calling on the services of Balgownie founder Stuart Anderson; the estate has been cultivated biodynamically since 2002. And from 2001, the wines have been made by Stuart’s son-in-law, who just happens to be a Frenchman from Cluny called Gilles Lapalus. He’s quiet and thoughtful; he must be single-minded, too. This is a very sincere, entirely uncompromising attempt to make wines of place. They owe

nothing to commercial Australian models; they’re not European, either. I barely understood them at first: the shock of the new. Now they seem to me to be reference terroir wines of some grandeur.

The range is a complex one. The second wines are called Fairbank; only the top wines go to market under the Sutton Grange label. In addition to the Syrah, there’s Viognier, Fiano, a Sangiovese-based blend called Giove, some Cabernet, some rosé (Syrah/Cabernet for Fairbank, Syrah/Viognier for Sutton Grange), and a clever carbonic-maceration Syrah/Merlot that is simply called Rouge. Single-vineyard Syrah wines are on the way, from two of the four main blocks on the estate: Ram’s Horn Block (southeast-facing, with pale granite soils) and Hog Block (north-facing, with more clay in the granite). Those soils are poor, permeable, and deep, and because the vineyard lies at 985ft (300m), nights bring respite from the summer’s fierce daytime heat.

And this wine? It’s dark, opaque, not glossy. Its 2004 counterpart smells of dust, iron, and granite; this vintage is more savory and salty in scent, with lavender, bacon fat, a touch of treacle, and warm horseflesh—the scent of an inland trek. On the palate, it is rich, earthy, chewy, and deep, a prodigiously textured wine with a huge flavor repertoire. There are black fruits at the core, but the wine seems to allude to so much more than fruit, and particularly to minerals and stones. There is a fierceness to it—and Sutton Grange was a fierce place on the day I called: open, dry, and radiant; so bright my eyes ached. It’s in the central range of the palate that you can taste that toughness, that you wrestle with the angel. Afterward, a note of sweetness creeps in; it evoked frankincense the first time I tried the wine, and dark chocolate the second. Finally, though, the sweetness seems more meaty than sugary, and the wake in the mouth after the wine is gone takes us back to that speckling of ground stone. Magnificent—and singular. ■