

Make mine a MONTE

WORDS DAN TRAUCKI

Montepulciano is an Italian red variety that makes beguiling wines, but also causes confusion in a way that only the Italians can. As well as the variety called Montepulciano, there is also a town called Montepulciano where they make wine, *but* they make it using Sangiovese grapes not Montepulciano. If the label reads 'Vino Nobile di Montepulciano', then it is from that town and made from Sangiovese.

If, however, the label just says 'Montepulciano' on it, it means the wine is made from the Montepulciano grape variety, such as 'Montepulciano d'Abruzzo', meaning that it comes from the hilly coastal region of Abruzzo in central Italy. Also being a very old Italian variety, it has more synonyms than you can poke a stick at, which only adds to the confusion. Heck, I thought the Italians having both a cheese and a grape variety called Pecorino was confusing enough, but this takes the biscuit, so to speak.

In Australia, where life is oh, so simpler, if it says 'Montepulciano' on the label, it means that it is actually made from the Montepulciano grape variety.

As Montepulciano (Monte) is often confused with Sangiovese in the vineyard, its origins are nebulous and often debated, but is generally considered to be Tuscan in origin. What we know for sure is that it has been around for centuries and is native to Italy where it is widely planted. Best estimates suggest there are about 25,000 hectares planted across Italy; it is approved in 20 of the 25 official grapegrowing regions. If you grow a 'non-approved' variety in any of the regions in Italy, you cannot label your wine as being DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) and thus (normally) it sells for a lower price – Super Tuscan wines an exception.

As Monte ripens latish in the season, it is not really suitable for the cooler, higher altitude grapegrowing areas of northern Italy. It also doesn't like high rainfall regions as it has a tendency to crop heavily, producing bigger, fatter, more watery berries with a higher juice-to-skin ratio, making wines lacking in the variety's distinctive plummy, weighty flavours and ripe tannins. In the most important DOC of Abruzzo, the yields are restricted to 14 tonnes to the hectare to ensure the wines aren't too watery or wishy-washy. On

the plus side, compared to other native Italian reds, it is deeply coloured, lower in acidity and its tannins aren't as aggressive or bitey, making wines that are smoother and rounder in their youth than most other native Italians.

You need a form guide to sort out Italian Monte, as it is grown throughout the mountainous Abruzzo wine region. Around the southern end of the region where the landscape flattens out and stretches down towards the Adriatic Sea, is where most of the Monte is grown, on these flatter, warmer areas – around three-quarters of it. Here the variety produces workhorse or commercial wines, in a similar way to what warmer/hot areas do for Shiraz in Australia. Then as one heads up into the mountains and away from the sea, the climate becomes cooler, the soil less fertile and the wines become darker, denser, deeper and much more concentrated. This is where the best Italian Montes are made.

The variety doesn't seem to have travelled well so far, with only small amounts being grown in California, Texas, Mexico, Turkey and of course Australia. Here it has blossomed from about 20 producers in 2010

to 91, according to Darby Higgs' font of varietal knowledge at www.vinodiversity.com.

As with most varieties, there are considerable differences in style depending on the climate. They range from big, rich, wide open wines in warm areas through to tight, austere and restrained in cooler climates such as the Granite Belt in Queensland and the King Valley in Victoria.

Ideally, a Monte will be deeply coloured with a fragrant blackberry/red berry bouquet and flavours with maybe a hint of cloves and good crisp acidity. And strong, tight tannins that can appear to have a hint of sweetness about them, but are not overpowering as they can be in most Italian red grape varieties. The two main styles are the Italian which is lighter (slightly) coloured, more closed-up, tight and very acidic/tannic in its youth. By contrast the Australian style is a deeper coloured, bigger, more open bouquet and smoother, more open flavours with a softer finish.

NSW

Robert Stein Wines 'blü hen to Bloom'

Mudgee Montepulciano 2022 is quite Italian in style; tasty, tight and grippy – very attractive.

First Ridge Estate Mudgee Montepulciano 2021 is a cross-over style, massively coloured like the Aussies yet tight, grippy and needing time like the Italians.

De Juliis Hunter Valley Montepulciano 2021 is an appealing Italian style, making it an attractive food wine.

Angullong Fossil Hill Orange Montepulciano 2021 is a cool-climate wine, Italian in style, yet with a svelte, long, lingering finish that isn't too grippy, putting it into a class of its own.

Victoria

Victoria's sole representative is **Gapsted Wines Valley Selection King Valley Montepulciano 2021**. It is Italian style all the way except on the finish where it is silkier, making it an attractive, classy wine.

Queensland

Queensland is represented by **Savina Lane Force of Nature Granite Belt Montepulciano 2021** which is very Italian in style coming from this cool-climate region. It needs some time to show its true potential; a keeper.

Barossa Valley

After Five Wine Co sent their 2019, 2020 and 2021 Montepulciano and it was fascinating to see the style evolution across the three vintages; very Aussie in style and raring to go.



Atze's Corner The Mob Montepulciano

2019 – what a class act! The epitome of the Aussie style, superb and elegant.

Riley's of Eden Valley Monty Montepulciano 2021 is a cooler-climate, more Italian in style wine which needs food or time to evolve.

Langmeil Massimo Montepulciano Primitivo

2021 – Only one of three blends tasted. Most producers tend to make their emerging variety wines as straight varietals. This combination of two Italian varieties has been superbly handled and works so well that it is hard to find sufficient superlatives. Suffice it to say that it is insanely complex, rich and divine.

Clare Valley

Matriarch & Rogue Montepulciano 2020 comes from a winery that makes a raft of exciting emerging varieties, and this is no exception. An exciting Italian-style Monte that needs food or plenty of patience for it to shine at its superlative best.

Fleurieu Peninsula

George's Folly Balancing Act Montepulciano Rosé 2022 is from one of the up-and-coming Fleurieu wineries. This is a serious and classy rosé. Quite tight and would benefit from accompanying an antipasto or picnic-style food.

George's Folly Pigs Might Fly Montepulciano Nero d'Avola 2021 – wow, what a masterpiece, showing again that a blend of two Italians can work ever so well. As one of the judges said, "Bloody gorgeous."

Riverland

Bassham Wines ably represented the Riverland with its Montepulciano 2020 and 2017. From the most prolific emerging variety producer in the Riverland, the style is very Italian, so it was great to see the wine as a five-year-old, showing how well it has matured and opened and softened up. At its peak.

Adelaide Hills

First Drop represented the Adelaide Hills with its Minchia Montepulciano 2017. One out of left field, with five years' maturation this wine is delicious and very moreish but more as a 'mature red' than as a varietal Monte.

Limestone Coast

New Era Montepulciano 2020 is a cool-climate wine, very Italian in style; tight, grippy and needing time.

Langhorne Creek

Kimbolton Brad's Block Montepulciano 2022 is an extremely attractive Aussie style Monte; elegant, rich and open yet with a tight, grippy finish that demands food.

McLaren Vale

Lino Ramble Domino Montepulciano 2019 is the best of both worlds. So sophisticated, complex and silky-smooth yet finishes dry and slightly grippy. A real joy.

Susuro Montepulciano Aglianico 2018 is another cracking Monte predominant blend with some alluring pastry/biscuit aromas. A fabulous food wine with either rich vegetarian or meaty dishes.

And from right outside the square, the exciting **Jordan Estate McLaren Vale Montepulciano 2022**. A superb, raring to go wine, superbly crafted by accomplished amateur winemaker, Gavin Pennell.

This variety will be very interesting to watch over the next few years. It is still early days for Monte in Australia and winemakers are still wrestling with which style to make – the tight, taut, restrained Italian style, or the more open, opulent, softer, Australian style. ♦

Dan Traucki is a wine journalist and a wine industry consultant. You can contact Dan at dan@wineassist.com.au