

MITOLO

Harvey Steiman At Large

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Italian Secrets Make Australia's Mitolo

What It Is. (blog)

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Frank Mitolo and his winemaker, Ben Glaetzer, dropped by for lunch last week to talk about how they make the Mitolo wines in McLaren Vale. Several of their bottlings have jumped out at me in my blind tastings, including a 2005 Cabernet that displays much more fruit and depth than most Aussie Cabs, without losing that savory edge that identifies it as Cabernet. The secret comes from Mitolo's Italian heritage. They use a similar technique to what Veronese winemakers do in Italy to make Amarone. They dry the grapes partially before fermenting them. "My family has a fruit packing business," explained Frank, whose father has been growing grapes and other fruit for 25 years. "We can use the same cooling rooms that we use for peaches and plums to hang the grapes and keep them from turning moldy." The resulting intensity does wonders for the wines. A preview taste of the 2006 Cabernet Jester, to be released later this year, reveals a big, brawny wine that has silky texture. It's very dark and berryish, savory on the nose, long and rich in the mouth. It's made to sell for around \$22 US. "I found that McLaren Vale Cabs often taste hollow," said Glaetzer, who makes his own richly textured Barossa Valley wines under the family name. "In talking with Frank, we decided that it's like Corvina and Rondinella in Valpolicella. Drying the grapes not only intensifies the black currant fruit, it adds nuances." In fact, only about one-fourth of the fruit is dried Amarone-style, a blending trick they learned from some of their favorite Valpolicella makers. "We like the ones with a little more depth, not just the simple, fruity ones," Glaetzer adds. The 2006 Shiraz in the entry-level Jester series is a bit more open and mouthfilling, but the fruit character shows more raspberry and other red fruits than black. The Jesters get no new oak.

Moving up in class, a prebottling sample of the 2006 Reiver Shiraz, made from a single vineyard in Barossa (Mitolo's only non-McLaren Vale wine), is very supple and silky, showing rich raspberry and red cherry flavors, finishing long and generous. The McLaren Vale Shiraz, called G.A.M. after the initials of Frank's children, is a darker, more brooding style, offering lots of cherry flavor. These sell for around \$55. The top-of-the-line Shiraz, called Savitar, comes from a different portion of the same vineyard that makes G.A.M. It's shaded with pine trees, yields less and ripens a bit earlier than the other Shiraz. The wine is leaner, more pointed, with dark fruit and a distinct savory edge. It sells for around \$75. "I like the savoriness and high-toned fruit of really good Italian wines," said Glaetzer, who admits that his cellar at home has about 90 percent Italian reds in it. "I'm trying to emulate that."

A mutual friend who sells imported bottles told Glaetzer about Mitolo. "The Italian angle intrigued me," Glaetzer said. "I expected to find wines with a lot of acetic acid, but they were already well made. Frank and I got along great from the start. The ideas just started coming out." I gave the 2001 Savitar, Mitolo's second vintage and Glaetzer's first with them, a 92-point rating when I blind-tasted it in 2003, for its beautifully focused fruit and silky texture. We taste a 2002 this time, a much cooler vintage that shows a high level of savory character, with a minty finish adding interest to the ripe blackberry and plum fruit. It still has years to go to flesh itself out.

Mitolo isn't the only winery using Amarone methods on Australian grapes. Hobbs, in Eden Valley, makes a heady, full-bodied red wine called Gregor that applies the drying method to Shiraz. You would think that drying the grapes would put the wines way over the top, but you can find plenty of bigger, richer wines that taste more strongly of dried fruit than these.

www.mitolowines.com.au