



WORDS DAN TRAUCKI

A number of things are surprising about the Georgian native red variety, Saperavi. Let's start with the fact that it is one of, if not the most, ancient grape varieties on the planet. Wine has been made in Georgia for nearly 8,000 years and the oldest signs/remains of Saperavi found so far date back to about 6,000 years. Way older than the early records of 'classic' European varieties. So, while Pliny the Elder was scribing some of the first European wine records, Saperavi had already been in Georgia for at least 3,000 years and most likely neigh on 6,000 years. Compare that time span with Durif which was discovered a mere 154 years ago.

The next awesome thing is how it is traditionally made in Georgia. These guys are the original 'natural winemakers'. The harvested grapes including their stems are put in an underground beeswax-lined clay amphora (qvevri) which are filled right to the top. Then the lid is sealed on with mud and the qvevri is left until next spring when they come back and simply syphon the wine out of the qvevri and bottle it. No additives, no preservatives, no oak, no nothing. That's what you call real natural wine.

Saperavi is a deep, darkly coloured red grape variety that is one of 525 indigenous varieties from Georgia, which was part of the Soviet Union until 1991. Georgia has a population of about 4.5 million people, slightly less than what Sydney has. Saperavi means dye. It is one of the very few winegrapes that has red flesh. Apart from the massively

deep colour of its wine, the Saperavi vine is capable of withstanding extremely cold conditions while still being able to tolerate the heat of some of our warmer growing regions, making it very versatile.

About 4,750 hectares of Saperavi is planted in Georgia out of the 8,126 hectares planted globally, according to *Which Grape Varieties are Grown Where* by Kym Anderson of Adelaide University. Despite only making up just under 10 percent of the 50,000 hectares of vines planted in Georgia (which produces 75 percent white wine), Saperavi is the single most important variety in Georgia, in the same way that Malbec is in Argentina and Shiraz is in Australia.

Since the turn of the century the plantings of Saperavi have grown by nearly 2,000 hectares across the globe with Australia being one of the countries where it has really taken off. There are 32 producers in Australia, up from 19 in 2017 and still rising. It is spread right across from the cool climates of the Alpine Valley, Granite Belt and Adelaide Hills through to the warmth of Rutherglen and the Riverland. There are two quite distinctive styles of Saperavi, with the cooler climate wines being tighter, more austere and needing more time to fully blossom, rather similar to the Georgian wines, whereas the warm climate wines are big, rich and opulent and sometimes even flashy and raring to go upon release. Yes, there are some betwixt the two, but generally they fall into one category or the other.

The first and very pleasant surprise of the tasting was that there were two sparkling Saperavi, Anderson Rutherglen Méthode Traditionelle 2017 and Gapsted Wines King Valley NV. Both were sensational, rich, divine, world-class red sparklers. So deep and densely coloured with big, rich, fragrant, almost sexy bouquets and absolute lashings of sublime flavours. Saperavi makes a cracking sparkler as does the Italian Lagrein variety.

'COOLER' MORE GEORGIAN STYLE SAPERAVI

Gapsted Ballerina Canopy Alpine Valleys Saperavi 2021. Georgian in style with an enticing roast beetroot bouquet and juicy yet tight palate. Quite classy.

La Cantina King Valley Saperavi 2019.

Surprisingly big-bodied for a cool climate Saperavi. It was very tight and restrained, needing plenty of time to open up to its delightful full potential. A keeper.

Ballandean Estate Granite Belt Saperavi 2019. Very Georgian in style with a mid-weight palate and lovely balance. Will continue to develop for a few years.

Clay Pot Wines Alpine Valleys Phrrha Saperavi 2018. The extra year's ageing has seen this cool climate wine start to open up and blossom into a very classy, drinkable Saperavi.

Clovelly Estate South Burnett Saperavi 2021. Attractive wine sort of halfway between the Georgian and Aussie styles. Very interesting and most drinkable.

Ridgemill Estate Granite Belt Saperavi 2019. Quite Georgian in style and depth, except for the deeper, denser Aussie style colour; it is almost black. It's ready to be enjoyed and appreciated.

Symphonia King Valley Saperavi 2017 and Saperavi 2008 (first vintage). What a great contrast. The younger wine at five years old is just starting to open up into a very sophisticated, elegant, cool climate version of Saperavi, whereas the older wine has reached its delightful peak maturation and is heading towards becoming a sensational 'dry red' as all the characteristics meld together.

'WARMER' AUSSIE STYLE SAPERAVI

Bassham Riverland Saperavi 2021 (pre-release) and Saperavi 2019. A couple of big, bold young bucks that just need a bit of time to evolve into great big, rich Aussie Saperavi – or decant and enjoy with rich food.

Pike River Riverland Saperavi 2021 (pre-release). Sensational. A top-class Aussie style Saperavi. Slick, svelte, sensational and raring to go. One judge said, "This is the benchmark."

Spook Hill Riverland Saperavi 2018 (pre-release) and Saperavi 2017. Delightful wines. Almost but not quite in the full-blown Aussie style, they are both just a smidge lighter, but still pretty deep and aromatic. So slick and tasty that they make great enjoyment on their own or with either vegetarian or meat dishes.

Cirami Estate Riverland Saperavi 2017 and the famous, world-beating 2015. A couple of classic yet slightly lighter Aussie style Saperavi. Lighter and brighter in colour, bouquet and palate, making them sensational wines for current consumption. Top marks.

Sirromet Riverland Granit Saperavi 2021. Vegan and sustainable. Lightish, more elegant style for a warm climate wine with a good dose of oak. Needs some time to blossom.

Dell'uva (Barossa) Saperavi 2013 to 2016. The opportunity to taste all four Saperavi made so far by Dell'uva was outstanding. They are big, rich Aussie style wines. Deeply coloured with lashings of classy flavours and needing a little bit of time to evolve to their full potential, with the exception of the 2015 vintage which is raring to go now. At nine years old the 2013 has hit its straps and is a world-class big style wine which will live on for at least another decade, delivering absolute masses of superlative flavour.

Patritti Barossa Saperavi 2019 and Saperavi 2018, plus the Saperavi 2009 (second vintage) from my cellar. Quite different in styles with the younger wine being a tad less 'Aussie' as it isn't as big and deep as its elder sibling. The 2019 is excellent and as close to a midway between Georgian and Aussie styles as one can get. Whereas the big 2009 is a sublime mature dry red which totally seduces the palate and leaves it begging for more.

Lino Ramble Simon Says McLaren Vale Saperavi 2021. A sensational, slightly lighter Aussie style Saperavi (one of the in-betweens). It has the Georgian elegance and class with the Aussie richness and depth. Outstanding.

Matriarch & Rogue Clare Valley Saperavi 2019. A brilliant 'crossover' wine with all the hallmarks of a Georgian Saperavi but with the depth and power of an Aussie. Excellent.

Hugh Hamilton The Oddball McLaren Vale Saperavi 2019. Built for the long haul. Almost black in colour with big roasted beetroot and herbs on the bouquet and

a big palate where at present the fabulous fruit flavours are subdued by the significant tannins. Give it half a decade or more and you will be amply rewarded.

Anderson Verrier Basket Press Rutherglen Saperavi 2017. What a cracker. No wonder it won Best Other Red Wine in Show at the 2019 Rutherglen Wine Show. So complete, big, round, smooth and luscious with a tight, grippy, food-friendly finish.

BLEND

Trentham Estate Murray Darling Cellar Reserve Nero Saperavi 2020. Designed to be a great food wine with some lovely herbal and aniseed aromas and flavours, finishing tightish and food friendly.

Clovelly Estate South Burnett Shiraz Saperavi 2019. The Saperavi adds additional colour and complexity to a very attractive Shiraz, making the total package an excellent food wine.

Hugh Hamilton Black Ops McLaren Vale Shiraz Saperavi 2020. A densely coloured fruit bomb raring to go right now, with or without food.

Symphonia King Valley Quintus Tannat Tempranillo Cabernet Sauvignon Saperavi 2016. What a delightful drop. Carefully engineered to make an attractive and appealing wine. Adding to the attraction it has a smidge of fruit sweetness on the front palate before flowing through to a tight, grippy, food-friendly finish.

Château Purcari Freedom Blend Tribute Edition Moldova 2020. A blend of Saperavi, Rară Neagră and Bastardo 2020. Outstanding with its delightful deep red/purple colour, gorgeous bouquet of red beetroot, a hint of nutmeg plus a dash of cloves and a smidge of dried herbs. Very complex and appealing. The palate is sublime: rich and beautifully balanced with a cinnamon twist and a svelte, lingering finish. Truly outstanding and raring to be enjoyed now. The proceeds from the sale of this wine are being used to feed Ukrainian refugees in Moldova.

In 2017 the Georgian wine industry decided to hold a competition for Saperavi wines from across the globe, made outside of Georgia. The event was called SapPrize (Saperavi World Prize) with the winner being awarded a gold tastevin. Entries were received from all the Eastern European (former Soviet) countries, Finger Lakes

Region of New York State USA, New Zealand and Australia.

I assisted the Georgians in ensuring they received entries from all 19 Australian producers at the time (32 today). The results were spectacular with all five of the gold medals awarded going to Australian Saperavi plus the Grand Champion SapPrize winner was Cirami Estate Saperavi 2015 – made by the team at the RVIC (Riverland Vine Improvement Committee).

RVIC is a not-for-profit organisation producing and selling hundreds of thousands of grape vines and rootstock cuttings to growers each year. Around the turn of the century, they started to import new and unheard of grape varieties that would suit the Riverland climate. To demonstrate to potential growers the quality of the wines these varieties could make, they planted a row of each variety and made wine from it. Small batches of a number of emerging varieties are made each year and sold under the Cirami Estate label. That way, potential growers can see what the possible outcome of growing that variety can be.

It is a testament to those involved that this humble operation went on to produce the very best non-Georgian Saperavi in the world, as deemed by the Georgians.

Some rare and exciting Georgian wines are available on the east coast thanks to Tamada, the Sydney based Georgian Wine and Condiments importer. In Georgia they make quite an amount of sweet red wine as well as their dry reds – a market segment that basically does not exist in Australia, but again worth a try.

Saperavi has huge potential in Australia as it is a big, rich, not overly tannic wine that can be grown pretty much anywhere in the country as it is tolerant of both heat and cold. Both the Georgian style and the Aussie style each have great appeal and can be differentiated by wine region where the grapes are grown, so that you can select the style you prefer. Aussie Saperavi has already proven to be a world beater and over time it will become a wine drinker's surprise heart winner. ♦

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