Why won't retailers find shelf space for such fine wines?

thirst
Philip White

BRING bring, "Yes?" A tough, tentative, sensitive woman is asking for Mr. White on his field telephone ... "You've got him."

"Oh, really? Well ... well I'm not used to doing this, like ... well, you know, I've got some wine to sell and I don't know how to ... well ... somebody gave me your number, and well, I was wondering if you'd like to taste it."

Within a couple of hours Marie Linke – "That's Mur-ree, not Marie" – was down from the chilly ridge atop Flaxman's Gully and Eden Valley. She settled at my table in the Badlands, gingerly removing bottles from her coolers, talking nervously of the rude difficulties in trying to get wine onto the shelves of Adelaide.

"Like one shop, you know, I made a proper appointment and everything, and they tasted our wine and just stood there, staring at me ... like, well, like I was a ..."

"Talking cockroach?"

"Yeah. They didn't seem to say anything. Just stared. I felt shocking."

I was sagely advising that such people are besieged by newcomers trying to get them to buy wine, and can't possibly stock them all, when Marie's first Karra Yerta nesting began to dawn on my palate. It was monumental. Intense, stony, classic High Eden rizza, very much after the style of the mighty Cascabel, which comes from just a little further along the same lofty ridge.

"But this is great wine", I blustered, hopelessly aware that this was no consolation. "Surely they congratulated you? No?"

No. So I named the shop and said "Don't worry; Reservoir Dogs. Overly masculine, especially in the smallest matters..."

When you think of the myriad mindless grog sheds, drive-ins, and smaller, higher-quality specialists – which are too thin on the ground – you'd expect they'd be taking the current glut as a great opportunity to lead the way with a few new, top-quality brands, no?

No. Most retailers – I won't mention our wretched wholesalers – have entirely missed their opportunity to take the cream from the hundreds of new brands which are struggling, like spawning salmon, to flood the shallow market. And they aggressively cack on brands which they don't stock.

Of course most of these wines are tiresome and forgettable: from growers suddenly left deserted, with no income, by the big refineries. Having designed a label at the kitchen table, they somehow pay to get some wine made; then naively walk out into the carnage of the duopolised marketplace and expect to sell half-hearted, terribly branded plonk at a profit. It's impossible. Hundreds will fail miserably.

Family business ... Marie Linke and her son Matthew (inset) at the Karra Yerta vineyards (above)

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But the very best, over and over again, are ignored by the retail empires. Which must mean these merchants aren't capable of recognising high quality, don't care, can't stretch that far, or can't sufficiently trust their relationships with their customers to expect them to take advice on unknown newies.

Or, overwhelmingly, it means domestically they're trapped by, addicted to, the same sickening downward spiral of quality and price that has our export business by the throat. While last year's total export increased in volume by 7.9%, the monetary value of it increased by a piddling 0.8%, to $3.72 a litre. That's the retail price of posh bottled water. Which means yet another overall drop – fourth in a row – in the value per litre of what we make for international markets, at the expense of our famished environment.

Also last year, domestically, there was a 28.5% increase in the value of imports, while total Australian wine sales fell. Surely this indicates a market hungry for new flavours and better quality, at the risk of increasing prices?

Meanwhile, Marie Linke's out burning shoe leather, building permanent callouses on her self-esteem, as she presents her beautiful wines at shop after shop after shop. Taste it!

The Karra Yerta shiraz is a killer, too. A young Jerry Lee Lewis.

Karra Yerta Eden Valley Riesling 2005

($20; 11.8% alcohol; screw cap; 94+ points)

Cool this, unscrew, pour your glass and ponder it while the bottle breathes for an hour or two in the fridge. Go again, and you'll begin to realise the quiet force and huge cellaring potential of this mighty nesting from the Valkyrie uplands atop Flaxman's Gully. For this is Valkyrie wine: syrupy, dry, austere stone-and-muscle with Tim Smith's sensitive wine-making ensuring decades of safe maturation. Strong food: duck, beets and red cabbage.

www.karrayertawine.com.au

Karra Yerta Barossa Shiraz 2004

($30; 14.3% alcohol; screw cap; 92+ points)

Rudely, unabashedly fruity and provocative, this is fresher and redder than the lass who played the accordion when we preached in the street. It reminds me of David Wynn's lightly oaked shiraz wines, still alive on my palate after 30 years. Full of coffee, cocoa, blackberry and mulberry, it finishes with the most polite little dash of drying tannin. Nuts. Elegant. Juicy. Vibrant. Not bad with cold roast pig's cheek and horseradish, either.

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