

HKY investigates...

The Sideways Effect

Not much of an investigation, it wasn't hard to notice the trend. The signs were everywhere. I first noticed it when my girlfriend brought a copy of *Sideways* the DVD... for herself. I thought shouldn't it have been a gift to me? I thought I was the big wine fan? 'It's just soooo funny', she told me as she kept it.

Then my sister started talking about Pinot. Pinot Noir? Then the final telling tale. My Dad came over to my house and told me, 'I'm not drinking any more f&@#ing Merlot.' 'Anymore Merlot?' I shot back, 'But Dad I wasn't aware you knew what Merlot was?'

The effect of the hit Fox Searchlight Pictures film was not limited to my immediate family. The wine-appreciation theme of this movie made such an impression on its legion of fans in the US, sales of Pinot Noir wines rose by more than 20% over the Christmas/New Year period 2004/5. A similar phenomenon was experienced in British wine outlets. Merlot sales also dropped after the film came out (others must have joined my Dads ban). Pundits called it the "Sideways Effect."

In addition to an effect on wines featured in the film also boosted tourism. *Sideways* was set (and shot on location) in the Santa Ynez Valley in Santa Barbara County in California. Since then,

Paul Giamatti as Miles & Thomas Haden Church as Jack in *Sideways*.

© Fox Searchlight Pictures 2004

visits from tourists looking to recreate the experiences of the characters Miles and Jack, have become common. Fans of the movie make a pilgrimage from the Buellton Days Inn, where the pair stayed to the Hitching Post restaurant, where Miles' crush Maya (Virginia Madsen) worked.

Sales of the Hitching Post's house wine- the Ostini Pinot Noir have been reported to have increased 800% with the surging success of *Sideways*.

FRANK OSTINI, OWNER OF THE HITCHING POST RESTAURANT & WINERY REMINISCES ABOUT THE SCREENPLAY AND THE EXPERIENCE:

'*Sideways* started more than 5 years ago as Rex Pickett (writer of the novel, *Sideways*) would often hang out at our bar on his visits here from Southern California. He said he was writing a book about our region, its wines, wineries, restaurants and people. He said the bartender and a waitress were in it. I, being somewhat of a sceptic, didn't believe it would ever be published. Boy, was I wrong!

Only in June of 2003 did we realize that *Sideways* would be a movie as location scouts began to comb the Santa Ynez Valley. Rex really had written a novel and that manuscript had been picked up by director Alexander Payne. His people were setting up filming in many of the places that Rex had visited and written into his book. The Hitching Post was one of those places. I, still being the sceptic, wasn't sure I wanted the HP to be part of this.

took note of what I had to say, although I knew he wasn't going to change his movie on my account. But I was convinced he was a sensitive, creative and very talented director. I knew we should be involved as much as we could.

Before filming started actress Virginia Madsen, who plays a waitress in the Hitching Post, came and spent time in our kitchen and bar to get a feeling of what that job is like and who we are. We also took her and co-star Sandra Oh to our winery to show them how we make wine.'

For Frank Ostini and the Hitching Post the rest they say is history. The success of the film was publicity, for the wines featured on film and the industry in general, money just couldn't buy.

I AM REMINDED OF JACK & MILE'S INFLUNENCE EVERY TIME I TRAVEL INTO WINE REGIONS WITH MY DAD. HE ALWAYS SAYS 'HKY, IT LOOKS JUST LIKE SIDEWAYS... YOU KNOW WHEN THEY ARE DRIVING AROUND IN THAT RED CAR. THE HILLS ARE LIKE THE BAROSSA...'

My father still hasn't brought any Merlot.

For a while it looked as though the "Sideways Effect" had bypassed Australia. In March 2005, Merlot sales, which represented more than 10 per cent of all red wine sold in Australia, were growing at 8 per cent. Then things changed. By early 2006, sales had softened by 5%. AC Nielsen sales figures show boosts to Pinot Noir but a negative movement in Merlot.

The Sideways Wine List

**2001 Hitching Post Pinot Noir
2001 Sanford Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Vin Gris
2001 Fiddlehead Happy Canyon Sauvignon Blanc
1992 Byron Santa Maria Valley Brut Reserve
1988 Tenuta San Guido Sassicaia
2002 Tantara Pinot Noir
2002 Sea Smoke Cellars Botella Pinot Noir
2002 Andrew Murray Cellars Syrah
1995 Opus One
2002 Talley Pinot Noir Estate
2001 Kistler Camp Meeting Ridge Chardonnay
2002 Melville Vineyards Pinot Noir
1961 Cheval Blanc
Richebourg (Domaine de la Romanee-Conti)**

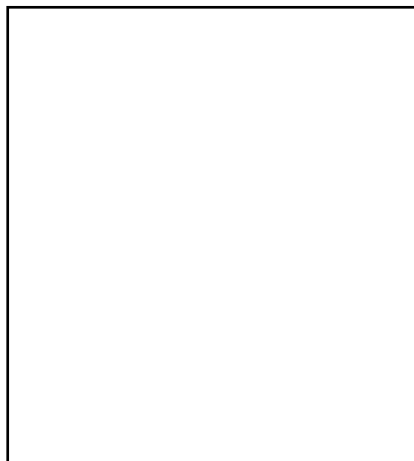
One of the boutique Australian makers of Merlot is VineCrest from the Barossa Valley. Located on the main drag- *The Barossa Way* between Tanunda and Nuriootpa, their cellar door has good exposure to tourists. I talk to Matt the cellar door and marketing manager for VineCrest about how their Merlot is selling.

'Merlot is our most popular red wine. We have been able to produce Merlot that has won good acclaim. The highlight being at the 2005 Australian and New Zealand Wine of the Year Awards- where we won Best Merlot.

At VineCrest we have seen a little effect, if any, from that famous line in Sideways. 'No, if anyone orders Merlot, I'm leaving. I am NOT drinking any f@#%ing Merlot!' Since the movie I have actually seen an increase in our Merlot sales, not saying that it has anything to do with the movie but more about award and publicity for our Merlot vintages.'

I ask Matt if he thinks the effects of Miles' dislike for Merlot is still felt with US drinkers?

'Yeah, we do have a lot of international visitors through the cellar door sales room, quite a lot from America where the movie Sideways is apparently responsible for negative impact on Merlot sales.



IS IT FAIR TO BOYCOTT MERLOT BECAUSE A FICTIONAL CHARACTER GOING THROUGH A DIFFICULT PHASE OF HIS LIFE DOESN'T WANT TO DRINK IT?

In recent months I have however seen a shift back to Merlot for international visitors especially from the States. I believe that the long term effects of the movie Sideways have actually been positive for the Merlot variety – don't people say any press is good press? A good Merlot can be BLOODY GOOD!!!'

Matt is right. A good merlot is a good wine and VineCrest are certainly helped by awards and good reviews. That has helped insulate them from any negative sales impact. However I am not sure if all press is good press. You don't have to follow the trends closely to know that if you have such a high profile piece of publicity bagging Merlot that the rank and file is going to have some second thoughts before buying.

Is it fair to boycott Merlot because a fictional character going through a difficult phase of his life doesn't want to drink it? No, not really. In the US Merlot is one of the most consistently popular varietals of red wine among Americans- but it can be considered mediocre in some circles- as Chardonnay is some times regarded in Australia. It is considered a bit soft. A bit bland.

FOR THOSE WHO NEED A RECAP OF HOW SIDWAYS ENDS I THINK A SUMMARY IS A GOOD WAY TO END THIS ARTICLE. IT GOES SOME WAY TO BACK UP VINECREST'S FAITH IN MERLOT AND MAYBE EVEN CONVINCING MY DAD HE SHOULD GIVE MERLOT A CHANCE.

After Miles and Jack's antics wine tasting they return to LA via a 'fake' car crash for Jack's wedding. Miles' ex-wife Victoria is still friendly with Jack, and is at the wedding. Miles learns that she remarried, but his romantic feelings for her are still strong. At the ceremony, Victoria tells Miles she is pregnant. Miles congratulates her and abruptly decides to skip the wedding reception. He rushes home instead, seizes his prized bottle of wine; the 1961 Chateau Cheval Blanc, and heads to the nearest fast food joint. There he enjoys his Cheval Blanc from a cup accompanied by a burger and fries...

NOW HERE IS THE PAY OFF. CHATEAU CHEVAL BLANC IS MADE OF 66% CABERNET FRANC AND, WAIT FOR IT 33% MERLOT...

Sideways Trival... what you didn't know from behind the scenes.

Alexander Payne the film's Director selected the film's wine list himself.

Sandra Oh- Stephanie- learned how to ride a motorcycle for her part in this film. We assume she knew how to swing a motorcycle helmet beforehand.

George Clooney campaigned for the part of Jack, but Alexander Payne thought Clooney was too big a star. Instead the role went to Thomas Haden Church, most well known for Ned & Stacy a late 1990's sitcom. Part of Payne's reasoning for casting actors who weren't well known, such as Haden Church, was to prove to movie studios that not all successful movies are star-driven.

Thomas Haden-Church was in retirement from film concentrating on voiceover work when he received the phone call from Alexander Payne to audition for the role of Jack. Haden Church was a finalist for a role in About Schmidt (2002), another Payne film, and Payne wanted to use the actor in one of his films.

Most of the wine used in the wine-tasting scenes was non-alcoholic. The actors wound up drinking so much of it that it made them vomit (and had to periodically switch to the real thing to stop being sick).

The guys visit "Frass Canyon" vineyards, which Miles describes as a horrible winery that doesn't care about it Pinot. "They don't separate their

pressings..." The winery is made up, "Frass" means insect poo.

Most of the dialog in the dinner scene with Miles, Jack, Maya and Stephanie was improvised.

The producers had originally wanted to use a bottle of Petrus as the treasured wine gathering dust in Miles' apartment. But Christian Moueix, the chateau's owner, read the script and decided to pass. So, instead it was a bottle of 1961 Cheval Blanc. Petrus is made from 100% Merlot.

The film dialog heard while Miles and Jack are in their hotel room is Henry Fonda's famous "I'll be there" speech from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). *Whenever there is a cop beating a guy... Whenever a newborn baby cries... I'll be there.'*

Paul Giamatti- Miles- reveals in the DVD commentary that the majority of people with whom he had watched the film were taken to a different, incorrect conclusion by the ending. Whilst rummaging in a box for what was in fact his prized bottle of wine, Giamatti made light of the scene, noting that "*most of America expect me to get a Luger handgun out here, and blow my brains out*".

Paul Giamatti doesn't drink wine.

There is a business in America called the Sideways wineclub which aims 'to discover emerging cult wines from Boutique producers.' Sounds like people after our own hearts.

Our Readers Write

As you can imagine we have had quite a bit of feedback in the last month. Keep it coming. To have your say on any topic please let us know.

contactus@boutiquewineco.com.au.

Roger v. H. works for a governmental department regulating viticultural practices in Australia. He had this to add to BR's article: **The Rant- Trench Warfare** in our last edition.

'I love listening to or reading someone's passionate view and your "Rant" certainly falls into that category. The article had me hanging on every word, however there was one error. The error occurred in the last paragraph, just before I was about to exclaim out loud "Genius!" I am talking about your statement 'equal or better viticulture (in the US)'.

Californian viticulture is and never will be equal to Australian viticulture. This may sound like an overly biased view, nay does sound like one, but it is the truth. There are many reasons for this. Firstly, the Californian obsession with mimicking European viticulture, secondly their deep, fertile soils, thirdly their cheap labour means that they tend to hand prune vineyards in the Central Valley when they should mechanically prune and well.... I think you get the picture. But apart from that, it was a great read. Thanks.'

WineFightClub replies- A good opinion Roger. Who has the best viticulture is subjective. I think you have given us a topic for a future "Rant."

Clint D. works for a bottle shop and is studying wine marketing in Adelaide. He had this to say about HKY's article: **Sympathy for the Devil on Piombo Shiraz.**

'I have tried the 2004 Piombo Shiraz and agree that it is a worthy wine, but I have to make a point of your statements on waiting for Parker scores. Becoming reliant on selling wine because of a high Parker rating is dangerous. Yes, it can help sell a vintage or even two, but as the US distributors are now finding out, a high Parker score for an Australian wine is not a long term solution to selling a brand.'

WFC- We agree and also disagree! The Piombo 2004 Shiraz has been our biggest seller by dollars in the last two weeks because of points scored!

We agree that putting a number on a wine is a silly thing to do. To quote the comedian Steve Martin "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture." Same with giving points score to a wine.

Regardless Robert Parker's influence on wine still makes a huge difference to a wine's sales ability. The last issue we picked up of *Decanter*, the English wine magazine, even made mention of a certain wines Parker scores. Amazing seeing he writes for his own US based- *Wine Advocate*.

High scores from Parker are still a godsend to emerging wineries, but you are right to have a good long term brand you need consistent quality, a good pack and a real back story.

Following up on the update we sent out on **Constellation Europe being busted by the Sydney Morning Herald** trying to rig sales figures by getting their own staff to buy wine from JD Wetherspoon a retailer they were trying to win a contract with. Jack C. who is involved with one of our fight club wineries had this to say.

'Buying your own wine sounds like good business. It is no different than sending you friends and family into a restaurant that stocks your wine and getting them to tell the staff how much they like it.'

READERS COMPETITION!

Win free wine... We have a dozen pre-release 2005 *Lazy Ballerina Shiraz Viognier* for the first person in each state or territory to send us 25 EMAIL ADDRESSES.

Sign up friends for our FREE ezine, but get their permission first! Reply with your state and the 25 valid email addresses to tbwadmin@boutiquewineco.com.au

One dozen each for QLD, NSW, Vic, WA, ACT, TAS, NT & SA.