

## Lunch with legends ignites philosophy of winemaking



*As the year of the pig commenced, I sat, snout appropriately in a trough of perfect seafood, at Paracombe, on a high piny ridge atop Bruce and Julie MacGillivray's remarkably stony viognier vineyard.*

The moon humped steadily westward like a giant albino manta ray. Away over the horizon to the east, lightning flashed over the Bremer Valley, although not a cloud could be seen.

We drank exquisitely. The 1990 Grange, whilst at the very end of its tether, reminded me of an unforgettable lunch I'd had a few weeks earlier with the truly great winemakers, Ray Beckwith, Don Ditter, and six of their grand old mates from Penfolds. In 1935 Ray was the first man on earth to understand the importance of pH in winemaking.

When he started at Penfolds in the mid 1930s - having been poached from Hardy's by Leslie Penfold-Hyland - the spoilage rate on the day's wines was up near 30 percent. The financial drain was enormous, the industry totally tricked and stumped and depleted by "sweet wine disease" and other spoilages - worse, there were container loads of Australian wine sitting in English docks, rapidly going off. Enter, a young Ray Beckwith. He had a hunch that the problems were largely centred around acidity, and so he investigated and bought a pH metre and played with tartaric acid and experimented on hundreds of thousands of litres of wine. Within a year he had reduced the spoilage rate at Penfolds to zero.

Now a bright 95-year-old, he remembers the day he employed Max Schubert, whose widow, Thellie, sat proudly at the head of the table. Ray's brilliant, radical pH theories are presumed textbook rote everywhere now. The world owes him a favour.

He professes to have only one allergy: "Bad wine".

These men, who remembered clearly winemaking as it was before the Second World War, pondered on the high alcohols that plague modern reds. We agreed we all preferred to get at least halfway down the label of the second bottle before falling over, and all the grandest



**Philip White ex-Adelaide Advertiser is back and lost none of his poetry. This week he came face to face with Penfolds legends and reviewed the Lazy Ballerina for The Independent Weekly...**



# winefightclub

old wines I've had, from anywhere, were well below 14 per cent. Ideally, I want my reds to be as healthy, slim and bright as Ray.

*"We never got much higher than 13," said Murray Marchant, the bright chemist on my right. "And while many say we simply added water to get the alcohol down, that's not strictly true."*

One didn't write at the dining table before the war, so at such a lunch, a baby reporter does not take notes. I sat there grinning like a goon, surfing in the amazing waves of knowledge and reflection that washed that happy gathering. But I recall wondering whether the wines of those old days were green enough, at such modest alcohol levels, to warrant the adoption of the high volatile acidity that these men made fashionable in wines like Grange, which were originally designed to take 20 years of dungeon before being ideal to drink.

Volatile acids, primarily acetic acid, the major flavour of vinegar, can at low levels add flavour, complexity, and fruitiness to red, but may take many years to work their wonders. Such acid is highly unfashionable now, probably because we have much higher alcohol, and so have sufficient character and body without risking the intrusion of the acetobacter bacterium which triggers the vinegar.

*"I reckon it's the viticulture mainly, Whitey" said Paul Drogemuller, back under the Paracombe moon. "Those old vines were close to the ground, with a basket of leaf canopy covering the grapes. Since we've taken some of the vintage variation out of viticulture with modern trellising to get more reliable cropping, we expose more fruit to the sun, and so get a rush of early sugar that they wouldn't have got before the modern trellis. We just get higher alcohols, and can't really help it."*

"Yet", I added. Some of the higher alcohol of the post modern era is the result of hyper efficient industrially-cultured yeasts. In Beckwith's day, one degree of sugar yielded one per cent alcohol by volume in a wine fermented to dryness. Modern yeasts produce more than that. The CSIRO is working in an enlightened backwards sort of fashion to isolate yeasts which are less efficient, in order to produce more polite alcohols in spite of the high sugar of the modern crop.

I shall have to wait until the next reunion at Magill to ask my question of the sages, but I do wonder how many of them will be there.

In the meantime, I suspect, winemakers are using over-ripe, peachy viognier in their shiraz to emulate the syrupy simple fruitiness that was once supplied by volatile acetic acid.

But in the north Rhone, from where we copied this blend, viognier is added for its high tannin, before it gets too peachy, because the shiraz is simple, approaching cranberry. You wouldn't add peach to cranberry. And I wouldn't add peach to a standard high alcohol ocker shiraz. More lunches urgently required!

**For more of Philip check out [www.independentweekly.com.au](http://www.independentweekly.com.au)**



## **Philip White on the Lazy Ballerina Shiraz Viognier**

**Vintage 2005**

**14.9% Alc**

***I don't know a better version of this blend. With viognier for "extra kick", instead of the gooey canned peach too many makers go for, it turns its rivals into silly lollies.***

***Lovely fruit aside, it smells of mushrooms and damp healthy earth - its dense luscious, and smooth, and chockers with savoury dry tannins and live grapes.***

***I panned mushrooms in butter and olive oil with black olives, chilli, onions and garlic and had 'em on toast with my bottle. All of it.***

***Do it. Heavenly.***

***94 Points.***