

Magic in semillon mix

An experimental formula is proving very successful, writes **John Lewis**.

A BRITISH liquor-trade newsletter dubbed it "a sort of semillon on steroids" but it could also be seen as "something old, something new and something borrowed".

It is the McGuigan The Semillon Blanc wine developed by Australian Vintage (AVL) CEO Neil McGuigan and his team of 18 winemakers.

Neil introduced the McGuigan 2010 The Semillon Blanc to the UK last year as a means of regaining market share lost to New Zealand sauvignon blancs.

The wine was picked up in an exclusive deal by the giant Tesco supermarket chain and has proved a big success, selling throughout the UK at £6.99 with promotions down to £4.99 a bottle. It was declared the best new release by Britain's *Drinks* magazine.

That has encouraged AVL to launch a 2011 The Semillon Blanc on the Australian market at \$13 a bottle.

Early this month, Neil McGuigan introduced the wine to a gathering of winemakers, wine writers and retailers at a semillon forum and luncheon at Sydney's The Pier Restaurant.

The winemakers included Hunter Living Legend Karl Stockhausen; 2011 Hunter Winemaker of the Year Liz Jackson, formerly of AVL's Tempus Two arm and now at First Creek winery; and distinguished show judge and consultant Mike De Garis.

Neil's guests were able to taste The Semillon Blanc alongside semillons of three contrasting styles harking back to the great Lindeman Hunter River riesling, Hunter River chablis and Hunter River white burgundy whites crafted in the past by Karl Stockhausen.

The riesling and chablis categories were sheer delight to me. The McGuigan 2003, 2006 and 2011 Bin 9000 semillons made up the riesling flight and the Tempus Two 2003, 2005 and 2011 Copper Zenith semillons



DOWN UNDER DEBUT: Neil McGuigan, centre, with fellow winemakers Liz Jackson and Mike De Garis at the launch of the 2011 Semillon Blanc, below. – Picture by Ashley Pini, Hip Media

constituted the chablis flight.

Margaret River semillons and oaked semillons represented the white burgundy segment – much less pleasing to my Hunter palate.

But "something borrowed", the old Lindeman white burgundy style, was a starting point for the creation of The Semillon Blanc. Then there was "something old", the semillon variety, and "something new", the use of special yeasts to provide a zip and aromatics and other techniques to impart a floral lift on the nose and to soften the flavours.

The 2011 Semillon Blanc is a blend of 30 per cent Riverland, 30 per cent Sunraysia and 10 per cent Barossa Valley grapes and shines in the glass with brassy-tinted straw hues.

It has kiwifruit aromas and

brings crisp citrus flavour to the front palate. Zingy gooseberry, spice and lemon sorbet characters combine on the middle palate and slatey acid features at the finish.

Neil McGuigan sees it as the "new millennium white burgundy style" and hopes it will encourage a new generation of wine drinkers to progress onto the riesling- and chablis-style semillons that the Hunter Valley does so superbly.

He says "The Semillon Blanc story began when he was in Britain and was asked, "what's the next big thing coming out of the Australian wine industry?"

The question stumped him and, on the flight home, he mulled over answers. Could it be pinot gris or riesling wines? No, he thought, the Germans

had a mortgage on riesling and the Italians dominated pinot gris. Then came the answer from left-field – semillon, that marvellously versatile variety Neil cut his winemaking teeth on in the Hunter Valley.

He called his 18 AVL group winemakers together and asked each to employ semillon to produce an aromatic, flavoursome and crisp white wine.

He got 18 experimental wines, one of which was pink.

Out of the trial the formula for The Semillon Blanc was devised and Thomas Jung, the Pokolbin-born, 30-year-old winemaker who runs AVL's huge Buronga Hill winery, set about making the inaugural 100 per cent Sunraysia fruit-based 2010 wine.

Now comes the 2011, which has been given a 10 per cent dose of Barossa semillon.

Having tasted the 2010 version last September, I think the 2011 has an extra dimension to it.

It's a clever piece of winemaking and a welcome alternative to the invading hordes of New Zealand sauvignon blancs – so often green, pungent and excessively herbal.



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