

Tempranillo's time

AS OUR LOVE AFFAIR WITH SPANISH FOOD CONTINUES TO FLOURISH SO SHOULD OUR LOVE OF SPAIN'S PROUDEST WINE VARIETAL – TEMPRANILLO.

Words **Mark Hughes** Photography **Ange Maloney (Enigma Digital)**

GUEST PANELLISTS



Frank van de Loo is the winemaker at Mount Majura Vineyard in the Canberra District. He is a member of TempraNeo, a group of winemakers dedicated to championing Tempranillo and has been producing top notch cool-climate Temp since 2003.



Mike Brown is the winemaker for Gemtree Vineyards in McLaren Vale. He has worked on vintages in Spain and has been producing quality Tempranillo in Australia since the late 1990s. He is also a founding member of TempraNeo.

In 1605, King Phillip III of Spain sent three boats on a discovery of the Pacific with the precise purpose of finding the fabled 'Terra Australis' (southern land). A year later the captain of one of those boats, Luis Vaez de Torres (Portuguese by birth but sailing for the Spanish), came agonisingly close to discovering Australia for the Europeans. Scooting across the top of the country he charted the south coast of New Guinea and sailed through the strait that now bears his name. Had Torres drifted slightly south we may now all be speaking Spanish, eating tapas and drinking Tempranillo. Torres didn't and Cooky did his thing a century-and-a-half later and the rest, as they say, is history, including the fact most of our popular wine varieties are of French origin.

While we still enjoy our Cab Sav, Shiraz and Pinot, emerging varieties are finding favour with the Australian drinking public who thirst for more food savvy matches to meet our growing culinary offerings. This is where Tempranillo comes in.

It is no surprise that tapas is becoming more popular in this country. After all, it really suits our lifestyle – it is quick and easy, offers lots of different tastes in one sitting and is very social. As plenty of Spaniards will testify, the perfect wine match for this type of cuisine is Tempranillo – its spicy, berry-fruit muskiness and mouth-filling tannins are ideally suited to a range of shared plates including chorizo, jamón, patatas bravas and gamey paella.

Mount Majura Tempranillo 2009 (Canberra District)

A peaty nose with savoury Moroccan spice. Ripe juicy fruit with assertive chalky tannins and excellent length. Structurally it has enough fruit expression to hold the oak. A perfect food matching wine that will get even better with five years in the bottle.

Audrey Wilkinson Tempranillo 2009 (Hunter Valley)

This can't be from the Hunter Valley but it is! Nice smoky rancio characters, with a really appealing mouth weight and excellent structure. A remarkable wine from young vines.

West Cape Howe Tempranillo 2009 (Great Southern)

Real varietal characters with a musky nose and glossy balanced fruit. A gamey hint on the palate, svelte stylish tannins and lovely length. Slightly acidic which points to good aging potential.

La Linea Tempranillo 2010 (Adelaide Hills)

This is a real feminine example of Tempranillo. A fragrance of pretty violets and spice with slightly overt acids on the finish. Enough spaces through the wine to allow for good conversation.

Ross Estate Tempranillo 2009 (Barossa)

An example of regional rather than varietal. A pretty wine with a fragrant red fruit spectrum and rusty nail savouriness. Simple, but made well. Plush and forward, so drink now.

Hugh Hamilton Tempranillo 2010 (McLaren Vale)

Good colour for a 2010 with slightly overt acids but possessing a malty richness, fresh earth savouriness and soft plush palate with perfumed grainy tannins.

Gemtree Tempranillo 2010 (McLaren Vale)

One of the most food evocative wines of the tasting. A serious wine with depth and structure, ripe tomatoes, meat and smoky ham. A funkiness that is reductive – strong on the tannins but balanced by the sweet fruit. Should be great with food.



So now you know what wine you should take to your next Spanish fiesta, but which Tempranillo should you take? What qualities make a good Tempranillo? Which regions in Australia produce good Temp and who are the prime producers? These are the questions we set about answering in this State of Play.

In Spain Tempranillo is revered as the king of grape varieties. It is thought to have originated in the Rioja wine region but its versatility and the fact that it thrives in heat and drought has seen it spread right across the Iberian Peninsula. And, like many ancient varieties, it has mutated many times; in fact there are over 500 known clones of Tempranillo and it goes under a host of different names. For instance, in Catalonia it is known as Ull de Llebre, South of Madrid as Valdepenas, the man from La Mancha would call it Cencibel, in Ribera del Duero it is called Tinto Fino, while over in Portugal's Douro it masquerades as Tinta Roriz.

Most commonly though, it is known as Tempranillo and for good reason. Its name is derived from the Spanish word 'temprano' meaning early – in this case, early ripening. This is another key facet to its versatility and to its extensive growth across Spain and Portugal as it works well in both warm regions and in cooler, high altitude regions where early ripening varieties are desirable.

TEMPRANILLO IN AUSTRALIA

Tempranillo has only been planted here for about 20 years with one of the first producers being Victoria's Brown Brothers and Yalumba in the Barossa, who planted it in their 'Kindergarten Vineyards' – small patches of dirt dedicated to trialling batches of new varieties. Their first vintages (around 1994) were encouraging enough to continue experimentation with newer clones also being trialled. Since then, Tempranillo has been planted in many regions across the country, all with relative success.

Two pioneering producers are Mike Brown from Gemtree Vineyards in South Australia's McLaren Vale and Frank van de Loo from Mount Majura in the Canberra District, who were invited to join the Wine Selectors Tasting Panel for this tasting.

Both Mike and Frank are integral members of TempraNeo, a dedicated group of winemakers who have banded together to promote the profile of Tempranillo in Australia (visit www.tempraneo.com.au for more details).

After working vintages in Spain in the 1990s, Mike was inspired to plant Tempranillo in the notoriously tough crabhole gilgai soil at Gemtree in 1998. This type of soil is excessively dense and results in low water extraction and very low permeability and aeration. Rather than pose a deterrent to the health of the vines, Mike has found that these natural limitations have a positive effect on the vigorous nature of Tempranillo.

"It has responded to those conditions and very quickly it has found its feet," says Mike, who also introduced another redeeming quality of the variety: it can be consumed young.

"Even off some of the young vine material we are getting great expression," he says. "It doesn't necessarily need two or three years to look attractive. You can open a bottle of young Tempranillo and it's showing great varietal characteristics."

Glandore Estate Tempranillo 2008 (Hunter Valley/Adelaide Hills)

This Hunter/Adelaide Hills blend floored the Panel who loved the way it moved forward, finished so soft and was perfectly balanced. Some beautiful Tempranillo characters with baked meat savouriness, lovely sweet, soft fruit and a mouth-watering finish. It had so much going on but was so elegant at the same time.

Running with Bulls Tempranillo 2010 (Barossa)

A great example of a warm climate Tempranillo but nothing about it is hot as it has all the things you look for – excellent colour, an aromatic spectrum, lovely fruit and a rich cherry, chocolate spice. It is the sort of thing you want to see more of in this country.

Sanguine Estate Tempranillo 2006 (Heathcote)

The Panel thought this wine was a great example of what works in Spain's famous Rioja wine region. Juicy and fleshy and almost sweet but dry at the same time, well balanced with great intensity. Plush mid-palate tannins with a velvety mouthfeel yet so alive, zesty and youthful. Just a terrific wine.

Chapel Hill il Vescovo Tempranillo 2010 (McLaren Vale/Adel Hills)

This is a more masculine example of Tempranillo and is a sure long term prospect, yet approachable with ripe fruit sweetness and already showing advanced characters.

Kellermeister Tempranillo 2008 (Barossa/Adelaide Hills)

This wine spoke of its regions – Barossa and Adelaide Hills. An elegant style with powerful fruit flavours. Floral aromatic perfumes with Turkish delight characters.

Belebula Pokolbin Estate Tempranillo 2007 (Hunter Valley)

A wine that's really comfortable inside its own skin. Natural and open. Earthy oak on the nose, complex flavours, fine balance, good texture and a firm finish.



“The regions came through as I expected; for example, some really glossy beautiful wines came from the Barossa. The one stand-out for me was the performance of the Hunter; a couple of absolutely delicious wines that you wanted to drink.”

Up at Frank van de Loo’s vineyard just outside Canberra, Tempranillo is grown on the high slopes of Mount Majura in red volcanic soils also containing limestone, where, it is fair to say, this talented Spanish varietal is equally at home.

“Tempranillo is very versatile and adapts well to a range of climates,” reinforces Frank. “It expresses where it has been grown. So you see everything from bright red berry fruit characters in cooler climates right through to the very rich black fruits, almost chocolate characters, in the warmer climates.

“So you can get quite a big spectrum – really juicy, easy-to-drink, up front wines to wines that have quite a lot more plushness and richness with really powerful tannins.”

So without further adieu, we sat down to test where Tempranillo currently sits in the Australian wine landscape.

THE TASTING

While Tempranillo is still used in lots of blends, our tasting guidelines requested straight Tempranillo and close to 50 producers from more than 20 wine regions across the country submitted some wonderful examples with the overall standard being quite high.

Established Tempranillo regions such as the Barossa, McLaren Vale and Adelaide Hills performed well with more than half of our top 20 coming from these regions. However, it must be said that a few of these wines showed more regional characteristics than varietal ones, meaning considerate management in the vineyard and skilled winemaking had pushed these wines to the forefront.

When discussing regionalism, however, the big surprise was the Hunter Valley. Not traditionally recognised as a top Tempranillo region, the Hunter contributed three outstanding examples to the Top 20.

“The regions came through as I expected; for example, some really glossy beautiful wines from the Barossa,” said Frank. “The one stand-out for me was the performance of the Hunter; a couple of absolutely delicious wines that you wanted to drink.”

“The Hunter really surprised me, too,” admitted Mike. “The wines were showing fantastic expression and really good fruit drive. Not blockbusters but beautiful to drink and that just shows the diversity of the variety.”

Oliver’s Taranga Vineyards Tempranillo 2009 (McLaren Vale)

Almost the complete package. Strong varietal characters with really luscious juicy fruit but savoury at the same time – almost bordering on rancio. Good structure and well balanced.

The Pawn ‘En Passant’ Tempranillo 2009 (Adelaide Hills)

As a dry red it can’t be faulted but it does lack varietal character. A bit of richness with dark fruit aromas mixed with tar, spices and tobacco. Good aging potential.

Natasha Mooney La Bise 2008 (Adelaide Hills)

Another elegant and feminine example from the Adelaide Hills. Delightfully varietal and youthful with a really appealing structure. The acid will ensure it lives for a hell of a long time.

TeAro Estate The Charging Bull Tempranillo 2008 (Barossa)

Very much a Barossan and it lives up to its name as one of most powerful wines of the tasting. However it carried it well with nice savouriness and rustic characters.

Quattro Mano La Reto Tempranillo 2008 (Barossa)

Bright and grassy with a gamey palate. Some extra intensity with varietal tarry notes. A bit of integrated oak, good glossy texture and a firm finish.

Crittenden Los Hermanos Tempranillo 2009 (Port Phillip/King Valley)

Fits the traditional Rioja style. Lifted spice with a bacon-like savouriness and lovely fresh zing that made it stand out. An earthy middle-to-end palate, balanced fruit, good texture and firm tannins.

Pindarie Black Hinge Reserve Tempranillo 2008 (Barossa)

Once again more Barossan than varietal but lovely and sweet with black cherries and a dusty coffee aroma. A rich glossy palate and fine finish. A perfect drink for the masses.





Diversity was indeed the next major discussion point. Not only did the tasting confirm the enormous potential for Tempranillo to adapt to different climates, but it also showed that different regions could produce appealing wines that express variety, albeit at different ends of the spectrum. For instance, Yalumba's Running With Bulls 2010 Tempranillo, which was an early benchmark in the tasting, showed characters of lovely fruit with rich cherry chocolate spice, the 2010 La Linea from the Adelaide Hills was more fragrant and lifted with pretty violets and spice, while the 2009 Mount Majura was described as having ripe juicy fruit with assertive chalky tannins.

"Versatility was a big thing that I saw come through in this tasting," says Mike. "It just shows how many different people are working well with it in different regions. It is not necessarily suited to one site, which is just fantastic for this country."

Finally, the fact that some of the highest scoring wines of the tasting were from the 2010 or 2009 vintage confirmed the comment Mike made before the tasting that Tempranillo is

perfect for the Australian drinking public as it is a great 'drink now' wine. While some of the wines tasted would look better after a few years in the bottle, there was little doubt they would be delightful to enjoy with tonight's meal, which is how most wines in this country are consumed. Having said that, some of these wines exhibited great aging potential and a couple of 06 and 07s showed this is a varietal that looks great with some age.

Overall, this tasting confirmed the unabated star-like future Tempranillo should have in this country. As a relatively new variety in Australia it is already showing an amazing amount of depth and broad varietal characters across a number of regions. It offers great food matching potential for our ever-evolving dining habits and as demand for Tempranillo increases, it is a near certainty that it will soon move from the category of 'emerging' to 'mainstream'. Winemakers might still be learning how to get the best out of this stylish Spaniard, and that bodes for some exciting years ahead, but where we are today with Australian Tempranillo is pretty damn impressive. I am sure King Phillip III would approve. ■

WINE SELECTORS STATE OF PLAY TASTING PANEL MEMBERS



Left to right: **Karl Stockhausen** (Chairman) winemaker, wine show judge, **Christian Gaffey** winemaker, wine show judge, **Trent Mannell** wine show judge, **Dave Mavor** winemaker, wine show judge, **Nicole Gow** wine show judge, **Paul Diamond** publisher.