

Tyrrell's, Vat 1 Semillon 1994

Hunter Valley, New South Wales, Australia

A legend because...

Hunter Valley Semillon is one of Australia's miraculous wines. Tasted very young, it can seem anaemic and feeble, notable only for its strident citric character. After five years of bottle age, it is transformed into a honeyed, toasty, complex wine, full of flavour despite its low alcohol. Tyrrell's Vat No 1 is one of the supreme expressions of this underrated wine style. No wine has been awarded more medals on the Australian show circuit.

Looking back

Tyrrell's is one of Australia's great family wineries. The land was acquired and planted by Edward Tyrrell in 1858 and he produced his first vintage in 1864; the Tyrrell family has been making wines here ever since. Murray Tyrrell, who became head of the family in 1959, was still very active in 1994, but, aged in his 70s, was being assisted both by his son Bruce, the present head of the company, and by winemaker Andrew Spinaze, who still holds that position today. Then as now, Tyrrell's remains hugely committed to Semillon, and produces three single-vineyard bottlings. Nonetheless, Vat 1 has always been conceived as the company's top wine. It was first made in 1962 and known as Hunter Valley Riesling, when European grape and regional names were used with abandon. In 1990 the present name was adopted.

The vintage

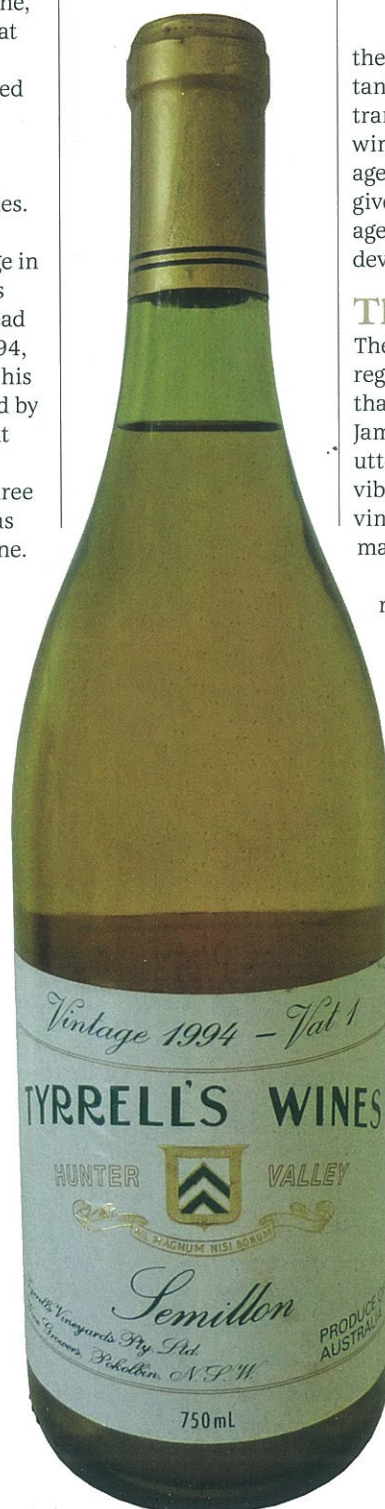
A late bud-burst led the estate to assume the vintage would be fairly late. However, very warm weather in December and January speeded up the ripening, although it also led to bush fires, the smoke from which may have tainted some wines. The fruit for Vat 1 was picked by hand during the last week of February. Although the vintage as a whole was patchy in New South Wales, the Hunter Semillon grapes were in perfect condition.

The terroir

Vat 1 comes from two very old blocks within two vineyards, with a combined area of about six hectares. Short Flat was planted in 1923, while the oldest vines in Johnno's Vineyard date from 1908. The two blocks are separated by just 800m. They flank the same creek and share the same alluvial sandy loam soils. Both blocks are unirrigated.

The wine

Australia is renowned (or criticised) for its high-tech approach to winemaking, but Hunter Valley Semillon has always been an exception. Vat 1 follows the usual pattern in being fermented in stainless steel tanks;



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thereafter it receives minimal lees contact in the tanks and is bottled early. It is bottle-ageing that transforms Semillon from a lightweight, neutral wine to one with extraordinary intensity. This ageing is undertaken by the winery itself, which gives some of its Semillons up to five years' bottle age so as to allow its secondary characteristics to develop before the wine is released.

The reaction

The wine certainly pleased Australian judges in the regional and national shows; it garnered no fewer than 32 gold medals and 12 trophies. In 2001, James Halliday lavished praise on the wine: 'An utterly magical combination of complexity and vibrant freshness.' (Today he points out that vintages such as 1994, which were sealed with cork, may suffer from random oxidation.)

In 2007, Huon Hooke and Ralph Kyte-Powell noted: 'The nose is mellow, quietly complex – and only lightly toasty. Melon, wood smoke, earth and honey lead the way. The palate is rich and unusually smoky.' They scored it 95/100.

Jeremy Oliver, in 2009, was blown away: 'This complex, deeply layered Semillon has acquired plenty of richness and depth. Its smoky, meaty bouquet reveals nuances of buttered toast and dried flowers over rich notes of melon-like fruit. Its intense, exceptionally long core of assertive flavour drives onwards to a savoury, slightly earthy finish tightly wound around a fabulously taut acidity.'

Australian wine writer Ken Gargett shared his last bottle with friends in June 2014 and reported: 'Refined, elegant, almost delicate. Finely balanced, with hints of spice and lemon and, with time, plenty of mango notes. Excellent length, mature and complex. Why leave it any longer as it is drinking so beautifully now?' **D**

THE FACTS

Bottles produced 30,000

Composition 100% Semillon

Yield about 35hl/ha

Alcohol 10.6%

Release price about A\$15

Price today not available, but vintages from the late 1990s are listed at £50-£90, so the 1994 would probably fetch more.

by Stephen Brook