



Talking Rot

Rob Ingram fears our new love affair with 'stickies' is based on an approach that ignores the range and potential of the botrytis style.

For a wine style that owes its very existence to the 'noble rot', Australia's botrytised wines have had to put up with a lot more rot than nobility. For instance, here the larrikin term 'sticky' is applied to a style revered elsewhere as 'ambrosial'. This lack of respect suggests an over-familiarity with a complex product with which most of us are not very familiar at all. While botrytised wines certainly enjoy approval in Australia, most producers are still at the pencil-sharpening stage when it comes to plotting the style's development.

Robert Fiumara doesn't call Australian botrytised wines 'stickies', though his achievements should license him to say what he likes. Stuck all over his Lillypilly Estate wines are awards that testify to their excellence — the current release, the 2002 Noble Blend, for instance, was named 'Best Dessert Wine' at the 2006 Sydney International Wine Competition.

Robert is the man most likely to influence the direction of this Australia's botrytised wines. It is more than 20 years since Lillypilly made its first commercial botrytised wines — a 1985 Muscat of Alexandria and a 1985 riesling. In the two decades since, the Leeton-based winery has become acclaimed as a botrytis specialist.

"I relish the challenge of seeing where we can go with botrytis wines, and we've made a substantial commitment to exploring the style," Robert says.

Robert's exploration will further refine

the way various botrytised varietals match different foods. While wine fanciers can be quite unequivocal about which varietals complement certain dishes, dessert wines are a far less specialised subject. If there is a pudding on the menu, the host or hostess will dig out a 'sticky', but with little thought to flavour, acidity, weight and richness.

Most wine producers are satisfied with a single dessert wine in their range, but Robert confirms Lillypilly Estate's commitment to botrytised wines with a quartet — the acclaimed noble blend, a noble Muscat of Alexandria, a noble sauvignon blanc and a noble riesling.

TOP TIPPLE

Lillypilly Estate 2002 Noble Sauvignon Blanc (375ml), about \$22

Not just a gold medal wine, but a 24-carat gold wine. Colour and flavour both show remarkable intensity and the soaring acidity comes in like a cello in a Mozart quartet. Flavour-wise, it's at the cumquat end of the crystallised fruits spectrum with honey and toffee notes. The acid thrill keeps things lively throughout its long finish. Stands out like a Mozart in a program full of Mendelssohns.

The composition of the Lillypilly range varies from vintage to vintage, simply because of the fickle nature of *botrytis cinerea*, the fungal rot that attacks ripe grapes, drawing the moisture from the berry and intensifying the sugar concentration, acidity and fruit flavour. The vagaries of the weather make specialising in botrytised wines a risky business and Lillypilly Estate compounds the risk by using grape varieties other than the accepted semillon.

Robert explains that semillon is the safest variety to subject to botrytis infection because it is soft-skinned and easily attacked by the fungus. Riesling, sauvignon blanc and traminer have smaller berries and can dry out quickly, affecting extraction, while Muscat of Alexandria grapes have a thicker skin that resists the botrytis spores.

At this stage of our appreciation of botrytised wines, it not surprising that Lillypilly's noble blend has become the constant in the range — principally because of the demand from export markets for a consistent, regularly-available product. The current 2002 release is a blend of 80 per cent sauvignon blanc, 10 per cent semillon, 5 per cent riesling and 5 per cent Muscat of Alexandria.

But to taste the Lillypilly difference — and to celebrate the increasing variety of Australia's botrytised wines — treat yourself to the 2002 noble sauvignon blanc. Preferably with a coconut crème brûlée. 🍷