

Earth-friendly Wines

Sutton Grange applies nature, with concrete

John Kennedy

Sutton Grange Winery owned by businessman Peter Sidwell and managed by French-trained winemaker Gilles Lapalus is fast gaining a reputation for innovation.

Sutton Grange, with 12.5 hectares under vine and about a 60-tonne crush (from 4.6ha of Shiraz, 2.5ha of Cabernet, 1.6ha of Sangiovese, 1ha of Merlot, 2.4ha of Viognier, 1ha of Fiano, and a new experimental planting of Aglianico), and whose wines are principally released under the Fairbank and Sutton Grange Estate labels, began a gentle conversion to biodynamic viticulture about six years ago.

Lapalus considered that the Sutton Grange environment, which sits about midway between Heathcote and Bendigo and is within the latter GI, offered a relatively low disease pressure and was a clean site so the dependence on herbicides and insecticides has been progressively removed. The vineyard has now operated on a chemical-free basis since 2001.

The move to as natural as possible farming at Sutton Grange has occurred over the last six vintages as a 'soft conversion', although Lapalus said he has always considered the phases of the moon in planning the vineyard schedule.

In the 2008 vintage he believes he began to see the benefits of



Sutton Grange Winery's winemaker Gilles Lapalus with the unique French-made concrete fermenters which he says are ideal for his unoaked white varieties, providing longer better fermentation characteristics, expanded lees contact and a different result to oak barrels.

the biodynamics with much enhanced vine health, much better leaf colour, plus the vines' ability to withstand a dry year with only limited irrigation water resources.

"We are not totally committed to a Steiner biodynamic >

regime but we employ what seems logical and beneficial to us," he said.

For instance, the coming vintage will benefit from home grown 'preparations' resulting from the equinox burial of horn manure, known as the 500 preparation. The horns are planted in the potager garden on the vineyard and after six months' maturation will provide the natural fertiliser spray for the vines.

To further the natural farming approach in the 2007 vintage when the vineyard suffered from a grasshopper plague a range of naturally produced sprays were made and trialled. These were produced from chillies, peppers and a variety of similar organic materials; plus the effort of 20 guinea fowl and five geese soon brought the grasshoppers to an end.

Concrete fermenters for whites

Lapalus has introduced uniquely shaped imported French-made concrete fermenters for the Viognier and Fiano white wines being produced from the vineyard's own grapes. The fermenters are an innovation which he had experienced in his native France and in the Burgundy region in particular.

The fermenters are produced by the French company Societe Nomblot which began as a manufacturer of concrete cemetery vaults before introducing the uniquely shaped fermenters which are manufactured from 10cm thick concrete in one piece and using all natural ingredients – sand, gravel, spring water and a cement without chemical additives – so effectively they are 'food-grade concrete'.

Sutton Grange Winery has two ellipse-shaped fermenters of 1000 litres capacity and one egg-shaped one of 600 litres capacity.

Lapalus said one of their benefits with the Viognier and Fiano whites is that they impart no oak to the wines. Moreover their concrete crystalline structure also assists in oxygenation of the wines, while the thermodynamics of their respective shapes aid fluid

movement for temperature, and the ellipse shape reduces pressure on the lees.

Their shape also aids the deposition of the lees across a larger floor area than a barrel, so this is a feature and avoids the need for stirring.

Their major disadvantage Lapalus adds is their cost. "Because of their size and weight the freight costs from France effectively adds about 50% to the cost," he said.

In the past couple of vintages, numerous US winemakers have also adopted the Nomblot concrete fermenters for the production of red wines in particular, although the French makers also use them as the traditional shape in Beaujolais, Burgundy and Pomerol.

For more information about the concrete fermenters visit www.nomblot.fr (although mainly in French it does have a couple of papers in English), alternatively Gilles Lapalus at gilles@suttongrangewines.com can assist with information. ■

Clean, green cleaning

Australian Colloidal Technologies Pty Ltd has endeavoured to bring to industry across Australia and New Zealand an alternate range of cleaning products that are non-hazardous, completely biodegradable and easier to use with better results.

According to managing director, Adam Anderson, the range of colloidal cleaning applications is manufactured using molecule technology. "Bacterial molecules have an inlet and an outlet portal allowing dirt particles to travel through its centre. Australian Colloidal Technologies Pty Ltd has developed an exit block, trapping particles within the molecule's interior. Each molecule can expand collecting oil and dirt particles up to 10 times its normal size causing the dirt and grime to dissipate within the