



## *Know-How Worth Bottling*

### *Part Two*

By: David Rymer



I was in a wine shop the other day - one of those corporate ones, all muted colours, clinical layout and marketing. Standing in that wine shop I thought about the knowledge issues that contributed to all these bottles being here right now enticing me with promises of fruity flavours, soft tannins and complex finishes.

Elusive questions such as - how did we capitalise on our "clean & green" image? How did we differentiate Australian wine from the stuffy French product in Brit supermarkets? One question stood out. What did this flood of new knowledge do to stimulate consumers?

Finding answers to knowledge questions isn't easy. Knowledge is tricky and ephemeral. All wild and feral, rather than orderly and civilised. You can never be quite sure if you have firmly pinned down cause and effect or if you have been

lured off on a tangent spawned by the Law of Unintended Consequences.

The best place to start to understand where consumers fit in to this knowledge scape was right there in that wine shop. The answer lay tantalisingly close, somewhere between the Sauvignon Blanc and the cool climate Shiraz.

There was no one magical moment. No central event that redefined our wine industry for consumers. It's not like we split the atom using cold maceration or landed a Sommelier on the moon! Rather, new knowledge was created by individuals pursuing a personal dream. Wine being a gregarious industry, new knowledge freely diffused via personal networks and shared experiences, researched over a good feed and a few wines.

In the pre-knowledge days, wine was serious. To consumers, wine seemed

either very cheap or expensive and intimidating. No one seemed willing to de-mystify wine sufficiently to encourage consumers to try different styles. Drinking the "wrong" wine with a meal was an occasion for serious social embarrassment!

Competitive pressure from our small domestic market encouraged wine makers to master emerging wine technologies in the 1980's and 1990's. New methods of handling, crushing, fermenting and bottling wine evolved through trial and error. New equipment was developed or imported and adapted locally to suit our wine making conditions.

Based on their technical knowledge, Australian wineries built a reputation for making good quality wine, with reliable grape characteristics that was enjoyable to drink, at an affordable price. Now that we could make more of the stuff, wine makers had to create a consumer franchise for it. Market research indicated the key lay in creating greater consumer confidence by transferring more knowledge about wine to consumers.

Wine evangelists such as Len Evans, James Halliday and Huon Hooke defused

the aura around wine by giving consumers permission to play. Similarly, the "value for money" proposition minimised the penalty for consumers if they got it wrong. Suddenly, choice was cool for consumers!

Experimentation was followed by education. Wine shows appear regularly on both the free to air networks and cable TV. We enjoy a large choice of books and CD's on wine. We can undertake wine appreciation courses with the experts or study wine making at university.

Somewhere in all this, entertainment overtook education. We can read wine reviews in the lifestyle lift outs. Boutique wineries supplement cellar door tastings with mailing lists and web sites, to keep us up to date on new releases and winery events. Wine shows shed their industry roots, becoming a celebration of wine caught up in a perpetual haze of gold medals and press releases. I'm not even sure if its knowledge or infotainment now.

### **Summary**

Knowledge can be a double edged sword. As marketers democratised wine, consumers lost too. More wine is bottled

early, destined to be quaffed young. Labels have morphed into design statements instead of telling us what the wine is about and who made it.

So, has knowledge has created an unstoppable consumer momentum? It's too early to tell. And that's another

thing about consumer knowledge. It's restless, constantly shifting from one thing to another, from fad to fashion. One minute we're enjoying big reds, the next we're surfing a wave of cool climate varietal whites. The only constant is that in a 24/7 world, knowledge drives consumer choice.

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