



The future makers

Australian wines for
the 21st century

Max Allen

Stefano Lubiana Wines

The Derwent Valley, to the north-west of Hobart town, is a little warmer and drier than you might expect, given its southerly latitude of 43 degrees. Most of the region's vineyards are planted on the southern banks of the river, on slopes angled to the sun, and the annual rainfall, much of which falls in winter, seldom exceeds 600 millimetres. Consequently, although the standard cool-climate Tassie grapes dominate the viticultural scene – riesling, chardonnay, pinot noir – and produce wines with great depth and intensity, some growers are also doing well with later-ripening varieties such as merlot. Some, like Steve and Monique Lubiana, have even boldly planted nebbiolo and shiraz; an insurance policy, perhaps, for an even drier, warmer future.

Steve and Monique have been travelling just outside the mainstream of Tasmanian wine ever since they established their 18-hectare vineyard on a steep bend in the river in 1990.

Over the years, Monique has been a highly vocal critic of the Australian wine industry's approach to marketing and taxation. She has long argued that the powers that be – the Winemakers' Federation, the Wine and Brandy Corp – are merely mouthpieces for the big companies, and have done too much to sell Brand Australia in the form of supermarket wines and not enough to sell the diverse, higher-price wines from the smaller producers. She has also been a long-time advocate of Australia moving from an *ad valorem* tax system, where wine is taxed on its value, to a volumetric system, where wine is taxed on the volume of alcohol it contains. The volumetric approach, of course, would make commercial, cask wine more expensive, and premium, boutique-produced wines, like Lubiana's, cheaper. Which is precisely why the industry (dominated by the big producers) is so against the change, and why many in the industry think Monique Lubiana is a troublemaker, and wish she'd go away. I think she's exactly the kind of outspoken, headstrong renegade the industry needs more of.

The industry could also do with a few more winemakers as talented as her husband, Steve. The estate range of Stefano Lubiana wines, grown on the vineyard's gravelly slope, is faultless, and includes superbly steely riesling, varietally correct pinot grigio, firm but supple pinot noir and excellent, complex sparkling. Steve also buys fruit from various spots around the state, and blends it with his own younger vine material to produce excellent, snappy, mostly unwooded wines for his second label, Primavera.

In the last couple of years, quality at Lubiana has shifted up a notch or two, with the release of some pace-setting wines, including a (very) late-disgorged, Prestige sparkling from 1995, which shows just how savoury and multi-faceted Tasmanian bubbly can be with extended lees age; a super-rich and nutty reserve chardonnay called Collina; and a dark, burly, rather magisterial barrel-selection pinot noir called Sasso. All three are serious minded and seriously priced (\$70 to over \$100), but Lubiana also has fresh, attractive, affordable new wines such as a floral, gorgeously

labelled nebbiolo rosato, and a sweetish riesling called Alfresco: a cross between a Mosel Kabinett and a moscato, he accurately describes this lime-juicy liquid as a 'pre-aperitif'.

Given the Lubianas' restless desire to improve what they do, it's no surprise to learn that they stopped using chemical fertilisers on their vineyard in 2001, and from winter 2008 they stopped using synthetic chemical herbicides and fungicides altogether and started applying the biodynamic soil spray, preparation 500. Steve says he hopes to gain organic/ biodynamic certification in a couple of years. If and when he does, it will undoubtedly encourage other growers to consider going down a similar path.