

No wine thanks – I'm vegetarian

By Gillian Hyde, Head of Membership, The Wine Society

Is it just me, or does Masterchef have an awful lot to answer for?

Those of us who used to put dinner on the table are now 'Plating Up'. (and then suffering a nervous wait while the recipients discuss the relative merits of continental versus curly parsley as garnish.)

Frankly, food is coming under far too much scrutiny for my liking. Suddenly 8 year olds can cook, 10 year olds are going to hatted restaurants, and **everyone's** a critic! And has anyone else noticed the concomitant increase in food fussiness? We recently hosted a dinner party, and I am mightily relieved that I thought to ask in advance if our guests had any dietary requirements. I received the following list: No dairy; no seafood; no mushrooms; no smelly vegetables... *what???*

As the partner of a vegetarian, I am accustomed working with some culinary boundaries, but that was one tough menu to put together.

Now even vegetarians are challenging the old norms. Some will tolerate seafood, some won't; some (apparently) find white meat acceptable, and so chicken is OK. Some even confess to an occasional naughty bite of bacon. It's a free world. I am not concerned about definitions, but guidelines *are* important.

The rule of thumb in our house is to serve 'nothing with a face'. The *face rule* is a fairly practical guide, although it has opened the way for some compelling discourse regarding prawns, and what constitutes an actual face.

For many years my signature dish - whole baby Snapper with lemongrass, ginger and coriander – was relegated. But happily, we have reached a point of compromise where this delicious dish may be served at dinner parties, with a strategically placed napkin draped across the fish's face: Snapper in Hijab. I sincerely hope that's not offensive to anyone, but the fact is that vegan/vegetarianism is a political and ethical minefield. Even your favourite glass of wine isn't exempt...

I was recently approached by a Member* who had read about 'vegetarian wine'. She was amused and intrigued, and asked for some recommendations. Unfortunately, I couldn't confidently give her any, because although animal products are routinely used in winemaking, Australian laws do not require disclosure of this on the labels. Don't get me wrong: our wine labelling laws are known to be among the strictest in the world, but even so, we are not required to declare the use of animal products in the winemaking process **unless they are prescribed Allergenic substances**.

The delicious simplicity of your favourite glass of wine belies the complex processes it has been exposed to on its way into your eager hand. Grapes have been harvested, crushed and pressed; the juice has been fermented, matured, blended, and fined, before being bottled and labelled.

The initial crush produces high quality *free run* juice which, which contains very low levels of phenolic substances. (Phenolics are found in the skins and seeds, and have a bitter aftertaste) *Free run* juice makes for high quality wines, but in most cases, commercial reality necessitates greater extraction, and so the skins are pressed to supplement volumes. *Pressed* juice has much greater contact with skin, stalks and seed, and is typically higher in phenolics.

Fining uses protein agents to remove those 'hard' phenolics from the wine. It's not unlike the process of clarifying a consommé (which apparently any six year old can now do, thanks to

Masterchef). Fining agents typically include egg white; skim milk; gelatin; and isinglass. Most people would be aware that the innocuous-seeming gelatin is in fact derived from the boiled bones, skins and tendons of animals, which makes it fairly repugnant to vegetarians (even on-the-cusp bacon nibbling ones). Isinglass is less well known, but is prepared from the dried swim bladders of fish (Beluga sturgeon, originally).

Because casein, egg white, and milk products are Allergens, they must be declared on a wine label. But gelatin - which is one of the most commonly used fining agents in white wine - and isinglass are exempt.

So I'm afraid it's bad news for the vegetarian traditionalists.

Me? I like everything - especially wine. The only 'face rule' that I have to apply is my own, and it has a lot to do with smiling.

*Member = member of **The Wine Society**