

SHIRAZ VIOGNIER

By Paul Foster

The hill of Hermitage rises steeply by a bend in the Rhone where the river still shows a fast flow. On its peak stands the ruin of a small stone chapel that - we are told - was built by the hermit from whom the hill and its wines took their name. Importantly, for us, it is the site from which James Busby took the Shiraz cuttings he was to plant on his land grant in the Hunter Valley.

Across the river, on the opposite bank, is an appellation whose vineyards rise similarly steeply. They enjoy a perfect southerly aspect and, as the French say, are baked by the summer sun. Accordingly, they call it the 'roasted slope', the *Cote-Rotie*. It too is planted to Shiraz but amongst the Syrah (French for Shiraz) grows the occasional vine of the white variety, Viognier. The two are picked, crushed and fermented together and in the process make one of the world's great wines.

You'd expect, then, that Australian winemakers might try blending the two varieties to produce our own expression of Shiraz Viognier. For some years we have tasted their efforts but (for me, anyway) many of the wines have been less than exciting. Things are changing, though, and there are a few lessons we have learnt in the process. One is that that the Viognier component must be discreet, say 5%. Another is that the Viognier should be fermented in contact with the Shiraz. On its own Viognier tends to be powerful, producing whites that display apricot qualities in aroma and flavour, and when added as a finished wine it can be overwhelming. When the formula hits the spot, however, the Viognier contributes an attractive smoothness of texture and an extra dimension of spicy fruit flavour.

Innocent Bystander Shiraz Viognier 2006

At a beautiful stage, showing fruit as well as development. Fragrant. Plenty of peppery sweet spice in the ripe red and black berry flavours. Long supple palate. Medium-to-full-bodied. Grainy ripe tannins. \$18

Wirra Wirra *Catapult* Shiraz Viognier 2007

Fruity and spicy in nose and palate. Red berries and plums. Beautifully structured and beautifully textured; round and long, soft and smooth. Plenty of weight but not at all jammy. Fruit skillfully backed by savoury oak. Mc Laren Vale. \$20