



A number of these photographs were taken by the major partner, Australian & New Zealand Winemakers.

Baptism OF FIRE

Five tonnes of quality Shiraz fruit from Mount Langhi Ghiran, five mentors, five teams with no winemaking experience and five bottled wine styles – the Wine: Baptism of Fire competition sees the ‘battle wines drawn’ like no other.

WORDS KATRINA HOLDEN

A group of wannabe winemakers have been getting their hands dirty in a fun new way to talk about wine – the Wine: Baptism of Fire competition. Established by Rory Kent, Matt Skinner and Sally Humble, it all began when the trio wanted to create a winemaking experience in the basement level carpark of the Prince of Wales in St Kilda, Melbourne.

Newbie ‘winemakers’ were divided into teams to work alongside winemaking mentors Gilles Lapalus (Sutton Grange), Matt Harrop (Shadowfax), Michael Glover (Bannockburn), Mac Forbes and William Downie. Teams worked with the same grapes from the same vineyard to create a level playing field – Shiraz fruit from Mount Langhi Ghiran’s Kneebones vineyard. “The goal is to create fun ways to talk about wine. It’s a captivating idea that’s trying to make wine cool to new wine drinkers out there,” says Rory.

The finalist teams consisted of several industry professionals including sommeliers Banjo Harris Plane (Attica), Raul Moreno and Mark Protheroe (Gross Florentino); also Pip Whiting (The Ivy) and Andrew Jamieson (Vines to Venues) – while Team Lapalus was made up of non-industry folk including Cameron Bachelor (teacher), Tim McLean and Cheyne McKee (both communications professionals at Worksafe).

Each team was put in charge of one tonne of high quality fruit from Mount Langhi Ghiran and Rory says probably the biggest challenge of the competition was “leaving control in the hands of the participants”.

“When they’re not paying for the fruit or the winemaking equipment, they can be very cavalier in their approach, and

that’s incredibly nerve wracking. Some of the teams have taken risks, but that’s where greater rewards are created,” said Rory.

Mentors were there to help guide the teams and all took a different approach. Mentor Michael Glover said, “It was an interesting exercise. Very much to his credit, Banjo had an idea of the ‘natural’ wine he wanted to make and he pursued it despite my reservations. I kept pointing out the peril he was in by choosing not to add sulphur. I even sent him photocopies of wine science books, which he politely chose to ignore. Mentoring was a good exercise for me. I really got something from it. It made me question my own winemaking philosophy. Dogma is death! No door should be closed. I’m experimenting myself with a number of small batches without sulphur.”

Andrew Jamieson from Team Harrop worked under mentor Matt Harrop and says the two most valuable things their team learned from Matt were: “Whenever you want to play with it – don’t. Less is more and the hands-off approach really helped us through this and I think it shows in the wine and it reflects its terroir. Secondly, to relax, take it easy and enjoy the experience as it should be fun above all else. This definitely helped us get through some of the stressful periods.”

Non-industry entrant Cheyne McKee worked under Gilles Lapalus. “Gilles was really engaged with the project, generous with his time and always willing to answer our questions and share his wisdom,” says Cheyne. “We have a lot of respect for Gilles and his skills as a winemaker, and the experience of working with him and absorbing his knowledge has been fantastic. Plus he’s a great guy, and a sharp dresser... is that enough sucking up?”



The competition had moments of hard work – and humour. Team Downie marked its territory in the winery with masking tape on the floor reading ‘Do not cross’, as well as placing a bike lock on top of the amphora they got from Australian & New Zealand Winemakers.

Team members have come away with valuable lessons about what it takes to make wine – and not necessarily what they were expecting. “The biggest surprise for us was probably less about some of the scientific aspects – baume, pH levels, etc. and more about the logistics of how things get done in a winery,” says Cheyne. “For us, being hands-on with the practical side of setting up for fermentation, pressing and racking was really valuable.”

His advice to other non-industry entrants for next year is to “be flexible in your thinking and be ready to improvise. Making wine in a basement, with basic equipment and no temperature control meant a lot of lateral thinking was needed, and we were often required to come up with creative solutions along the way.”

Andrew Jamieson said the strongest imprint the experience left with him was a respect for winemaking as a science. “While I’ve studied and read plenty about wine, it’s another language to me and the team so it was a pretty good eye opener trying to understand it all in a hands-on situation,” he says. He would also recommend other professionals getting involved, although he advised next time, “I’d move to Melbourne for six months as the stress of all of our workloads, being 1,100 kilometres away in Sydney and all

the flying was pretty rough at times – but we all chipped in and came out okay,” says Andrew.

Vintage Cellars has donated prizemoney of \$3,000 to be spent in-store and a sculptural trophy for the winner.

“We’re doing a People’s Choice because it’s important to reinforce to consumers that they’re the best judge of their own palates,” says Rory. “The purest way to gauge this is with how consumers spend their money, so to vote, people, buy the wine from Vintage Cellars.” ■

The wines

Rory Kent describes each of the five finalist wines, all available now at Vintage Cellars.

After Hours by Team Lapalus spent a lot of time in stainless steel tank; it is a light textured Shiraz with some moreish meaty characters.

Mast by Team Harrop is an aromatic wine boasting a distinctive eucalypt flavour.

Cain & Abel by Team Downie was made with a terracotta amphora and confidently exhibits both bright fruit and savoury graphite characters.

Method & Madness by Team Forbes is a bottle fermented frizzante style sparkling rosé that has a little sediment.

Onwards! by Team Glover was picked a few days later than the other wines, fermented in a ceramic egg and has resulted in a wine that is slightly bigger than the others but is perhaps the most balanced of the group of reds.