

SAVATERRÉ

THE TOUGH GOT GOING.

When they first came they were blue. Storms, dry storms, flashes of raging white electricity that croaked west to east, flicking lightning at the dry brown land like an adder, like a cat, like a killer at play. This was not casual: this was an end-game. It was five dry years in the making, five years of drought, five years of such low rainfall that this span of years is now in the books as the driest on record. It got in early too: Victorian summers are notoriously late, if at all, and yet in October, in November, in spring the dry blue storms came raging over the dry land, shooting trees in number. By the end of November 2002, a time when the Victorian fire season has commonly not yet begun, 328 separate forest fires had already been fought and won. It was just the start. It wasn't just the drought, it was the rub of seasons immediate: the 2002 Victorian summer was cool, long, but dry; the autumn was dry; the winter was dry: the forests were dry wooden coffins awaiting the furnace. In September 2002 I stood beside a stricken farmer in Heathcote as we surveyed his dying land, and he said: October is the wettest month. This year, it wasn't. The days were hot, and they stayed that way. In January and February, the days were hot and the months were too – yet still the storms came, and still they brought not rain but dry, and with the dry storms came lightning. Fire. Heat. The air sheeting yellow before turning brown, copper, red, orange. A week before Christmas, on 17 December 2002, lightning hit the Mallee in north-western Victoria, hit it so proper that in two days 70,000 hectares of the Big Desert Wilderness Park had been cindered. The sandy red earth seemed on fire. And yet it was merely the undercard: to an event that would span three Australian States – New South Wales, the ACT and Victoria. From 20 December 2002 and throughout the next ten weeks, fire marched and mauraaded, taking houses and lives – on the night of 7 January 2003, as another dry storm bullied through, 87 separate fires

started on a single Victorian night. Most were quickly contained, some were not: when the fully surreal fire times kicked in the fires of New South Wales, the ACT and Victoria had done the unimaginable: they'd joined as one, a fire spanning a mind-burning 800 kilometre front. If the start of this fire was 7 January 2003, containment was not called until two months later, on 7 March, and a safe final end not until 30 April. These were fires that burnt and burnt and burnt. These were fires, as far north as Young in the NSW Hilltops, that ripped through clean tidy vineyards. The result in Victoria alone: 1.34 million hectares of land torched. 110,000 head of stock lost. 41 houses and 200 sundry buildings. The worst fires in 75 years. An idea of it: Victoria is a fire prone State in summer. The average number of forest fires in a Victorian summer is tragically high: 196 fires through November, December, January. In 2002/2003, there were 485 fires in Victoria. In a fire season of this severity there are many things: not the least a lot of fire, a lot of heat, a lot of smoke and not much water. The smoke in the north-east of Victoria, and in parts of the ACT and southern New South Wales, was so dense that it hung in the air like fog, like apprehension, like a curtain on the hopes of those who stayed. Vines died: vines that had lived through 100 hot summers at Rutherglen died in the extremes of 2003. People fled: the north-east of Victoria copped the worst smoke, but there were other areas too, and if you could get out you did, and if you couldn't you packed your car just in case you absolutely had to. It wasn't the best of times, it was the worst of times. Long hot day after long hot week, folks were told to activate their emergency plans, and long hot day after long hot week, folks grew tired and turned grey-red and walked irritable. At the start of February, after weeks of smoke and fear, a young mother with her car packed full of treasured possessions, as it had been for weeks, drove her car and her baby girl

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through the hot smoked night and ran off the road near Myrtleford, killing her self and her girl in a fraction. Two weeks later the red-smoked torture claimed another: a young firefighter killed when a flash flood poured down a dry river, washing her and her vehicle to an ash-thick close.

These were the worst things: the lesser thing was wine.

For amid this, some folk were trying to make a living. For amid this: some folk were trying to grow wine grapes.

And when I taste them, they taste too good. The wines. The Savaterre wines. The wines from 2003, from the Savaterre vineyard, from the close-planted vineyard perched just over the top of a ridge at Beechworth, overlooking the Alps, overlooking what would have been a mighty, fire display – if there hadn't been the smoke clouding the view. There was so much smoke in north-east Victoria that year, and so much of it that made it onto the skins of grapes and into fermentation vats and onto clothes and hair and equipment, that when the big wine companies came to buy in bulk they found wine so tainted that it would take a greater ratio than ten (sound wines) to one (smoke affected wine) to blend the taste away. Ten. Drive around the north-east of Victoria today, and visit small winery cellar doors, and taste it for yourself: an acrid taste, a burnt taste, an intense taste that can seem like you're chewing the carpet of an old public bar. Some wineries, who initially thought the taste was not too bad, have then gone and withdrawn wines from sale – or uncorked them, re-filtered them, and then corked them back up. It's happening. It happened. The day the bulk of the 2003 north-east Victorian wines have gone away is the day a lot of people will breath freely for the first time in two years.

Which is why, when I tasted the Savaterre wines, and liked them – liked them a lot – I put them aside. Away. In the fridge. Out of sight. Over night. And went out bullet hunting – went looking for 2003 reds. 2003 whites. Anything 2003 from remotely near the north-east of Victoria, in search of more and more smoke-tainted wines, in search of an exactly smoke-calibrated palate.

It wasn't hard, and it was. Finding smoke in wine was the bit that wasn't – though, it has to be said, smoke-taint is not in all of them, and even when it is it's not always off-putting. It can be bacony and

attractive. Better than that, it can be non-existent: drink the 2003 Clonakilla shiraz-viognier, from the Canberra area, or the 2003 Castagna Ingenue viognier, from the Beechworth area, and see that the year could produce greatness. Like always, it depends on the wine, on the balance, on the overall display. Like everything, judgement here is highly personal.

Or for a lot of wines it is: though when I returned to the 2003 Savaterre wines, night time, mulling it all over, smoke taint is one thing I could not see. I looked and looked, but see it I could not – and the more I looked, the more I simply liked the wines. These are not 2002 wines, and nor are they 2004 wines. They are 2003 wines, products of their season, and bloody good they simply are.

So much so that in the end I had to ask; I had to know. How? It turns out, there's a story there too.

And it's a desperate story, so listen to it: it explains why so many wines in so many ways are so often compromised, even when the makers started off wanting anything but. Keppell Smith, the man behind Savaterre, planted his vineyard in 1997. He battled drought from day one. He had one goal: to pull every trick he could in the vineyard, and then get the grapes in the winery and leave the damn things alone. They'd make themselves. In 2003, not having compromised a jot, he'd consulted here and there and released a small amount of wine, but the true Savaterre show hadn't really uncovered itself, and the six year struggle was starting to bite. He took one look at the season, drilled the same look through to his vineyard, and tossed the rule book out the window. Question: how did you eek such good wines from such hell? Answer: "Because I knew that if I didn't get a wine, and a good wine, from that year, then I was broke."

Savaterre, like Castagna, is on the top of a ridge, so while smoke was certainly an issue it wasn't to the extent that it was in the gullies and ravines, where it sat and settled. Water was. Heat was. The vines wittled. The vines defoliated. The vines were not healthy. Smith: "People kept saying that it would rain, but I decided early in the season that that just wasn't going to happen. We had to do something. I didn't have enough water to keep the whole vineyard going, so I said: this half of the vineyard, I'm going to let go. I'm going to let it defoliate, I'm not going to worry about it, there's nothing that I can do." That was the

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compromise: not quality, but half a vineyard. "The other half of the vineyard though, I'm going to go mad over. I'm going to water it, and when I'm finished watering it, I'm going to water it again. I'm going to water it three times a week, unheard of in the textbooks, and I'm going to put a lot of water on it each time. I also bought a fairly expensive device that could tell me exactly what the ground moisture levels were at various depths – so I knew what was going on in the ground. I knew that I was putting a lot of water on, that I was pumping until in the end I was pumping mud out of my dam more than I was water, that I was pumping until my pump was completely bugged. But I knew that my vines needed it, and I knew that it wasn't too much – I wouldn't have got a wine if I didn't."

It is the way Smith works: he looks at what's needed, rather than what other people tell him to do. In all the winemakers I've met, he stands at the very upper limit of self-assurance, of knowing exactly what it is that needs to be done. Put it another way: I've met winemakers with more questions than Keppell Smith has. What distinguishes Smith is that he seems to have more answers.

I've related it before and I'll relate it again, and I'll do so because I'm just now understanding the consequence of it: Smith believes that trips to Burgundy for people making wines with the Burgundian varieties (chardonnay and pinot noir) are essential, but (and this is the thing): not at vintage, but away from vintage, when the local winemaking folk actually have time to talk, and to discuss things at length – not just the things that are done at vintage, but the things that are done during the whole wide field that is the remainder of the year. That's when you look after the wine; when you touch it, or leave it alone. Too much talk is what happens during vintage – what about the rest of the time?

Fifteen months ago I tasted the 2001 Savaterre Chardonnay and although I thought it very good, I doubted that it would travel a long distance – despite Smith's confidence in it. There was a butteriness, there was weight, it was delicious but it had the kind of profile that, from the experience of other Australian chardonnays, suggested that ageing would be a problem.

I wasn't the only one who thought it: more than one person said to me that Savaterre chardonnay was top-notch, but too much of it went through malolactic fermentation. I didn't agree; nor disagree. I wondered.

Last week I asked: do you still put your chardonnay

through 100 percent malo?

Smith: Of course I do.

And then he said: why do you ask?

Innocent question, I said.

"No it's not," he said. "It's never an innocent question. The thing is, (he went on) people get too hung up about these malo characters. The question isn't how much malo, it's when you then sulphur the wine. Hey, I don't mind that just about everyone else is getting it wrong, it makes me look good."

And good it does. You know that buttery 2001 chardonnay? Drank a bottle of it a month or two back. It looked lean, tight, a few years from its peak. It looked far less yellow and buttery than the bottle I had 15 months ago. I think Keppell is right on it. It's a grippy, bitter, intense white wine with the stamp of assurance on it. The 2002 shows a bit more oak than the 2001 right now, but it's angling in the same direction: it's settling in, rather than blooming out. These are Beechworth chardonnays, equal with the top of the class. The auction market, which has thrown 20 and 30 and 40 bucks onto the value of the 2002 Savaterre pinot and chardonnay since they were released 12 months ago, is not wrong.

Simply, there's something about Savaterre. The great years boost it, the tough years prove it.

Savaterre Chardonnay 2003 (\$55): Rattle the cage. Give it some air. Take a long look at it and see aromas of rice paper rolls, pear, mineral and toast, before a textured, layered, bitter, mineral-driven palate of extraordinary delicacy given the year. The finish is tight, dry and sulphured, hindering the wine's length for now, but given time to smooth and settle this should work its way through, and out. There's an aftertaste of ash, and it's a good thing. It doesn't taste like a freak-year wine; it tastes like a wine from the Savaterre vineyard; the best compliment. Drink: 2006-2010. 93 points.

Savaterre Pinot Noir 2003 (\$55): Think on the conditions; this is a year that should have spelled disaster for pinot noir. That it didn't is the biggest indicator of the magic of this vineyard I have yet seen. It's got the mystery, the magic, the complexity you desire. It's got minerality, flavours of baked earth, forest, rose, toast and tar, together with streams of dry, long, structured tannin. It does not have a huge mid-palate, in the way of Burgundy, instead there it's fine and dry and shy, but it does have nuance and it does pull through your mouth, drawing across your gums. It's a confident, European-like wine. Drink: 2006-2012. 93 points.

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