

Scent of old socks - splendid

October 25, 2005

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Look beyond grapes: even old boots can make a great drop, says Sally Gudgeon.

I ONCE knew a passionate amateur winemaker. She would scour the English countryside for berries, thistles, nettles, dandelions or any other organic matter. She maintained you could make wine out of socks, and who knows what she had bubbling away in those vats?

Her tiny flat was lined with the fruits of her labours. Even her bathroom was crammed with wine racks, making me wonder if she bathed each night in her elderflower sparkler. Whatever time one visited, she would enthusiastically pull out a 1991 rhubarb, open a 1985 wild strawberry, or reminisce fondly about how good 1982 was for gooseberry stickies. One bottle of her sloe gin could knock out an entire army.

Making "country" wine is an ancient practice. It's also a fun hobby that requires little expenditure - a plastic garbage bin or similar, some demijohns and a hydrometer. Bottles are usually recycled and those that have their screw-cap intact are particularly useful.

Apart from sulphur, most amateurs use few chemicals, and whatever organic matter you choose to make your wine from is up to you. Your creativity can run rampant. How about broad beans and banana, prickly pear and mixed herbs, or tinned peach and mango?

To prove that you really can make wine out of anything, even old boots, one member of the Frankston Amateur Winemakers Guild shaved some leather and fermented it, bringing a new meaning to the description "sweaty saddles".

Another member, who worked as a gardener, fermented Kentucky bluegrass from a lawn he had mowed. He reassured everyone who tasted it that the lawn's owners did not have dogs. He didn't mention an absence of cats, and the wine did have a distinct whiff of sauvignon blanc.

Another enthusiast relates how his wife complained so much about his fruit and vegetables taking up space in the freezer that he tipped the lot into his fermenting bin. It fermented for five years, and once bottled, won "best in show" everywhere he entered it.

Each year, similarly exotic beverages are lined up for judging at amateur wine shows. At this year's



The Frankston Amateur Winemakers Guild's annual competition this year attracted more than 300 entries.

Frankston Amateur Winemakers Show, 180 country wines were entered in various categories: stone fruits, berries, citrus, flowers, herbs and grain, vegetable, mead and "others", which can include such combinations as date, ginger and coconut, or canned peas and parsley. There were also 120 grape wines and 40 liqueurs entered.

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Gold medals went to a mixed herb wine and a pomegranate and malt. One of the silvers went to a wine made from plum blossom, which was like walking through an orchard on a balmy spring evening, so exquisitely did it smell of flowers.

The stars, however, were the liqueurs: a clove, carnation and rose petal, which was a truly amazing combination: spicy, floral and complex; and one made from cumquats, which was intense and, well, very cumquatty. The coffee bean liqueur was remarkable too. The orange liqueur was also outstanding, with zingy citrus marmalade characters.

Judge Chris Myers, who has made country wines for more than 25 years, explains that when judging such diverse wines, he has to rely on his memory and knowledge of what to expect from the ingredients. As with conventional wine shows, marks are awarded out of 20 for appearance, aromas and flavours that are true to the organic matter used, and an overall impression. Alcohol levels are not stated on the wines but are usually between 12 and 15 per cent.

None of the wines that Myers judges are available commercially, but a few wineries in Australia make fruit wines. It's a niche market, and as Fred Swainston from Giverny Estate at Toolangi in the Yarra Valley says: "People have to try before they buy. These wines have completely different flavours." Most of his customers are tourists who have enjoyed visiting the scenic property and tasting his kiwi fruit wines: dry, medium, sparkling, liqueur and schnapps. Once back home, they frequently re-order, and he sends his wines all over the world.

Brian Collett from Tathra Winery at Nannup in Western Australia makes wines from organic satsuma plums. They don't have added preservatives because the high alcohol, usually more than 15 per cent, preserves the wine.

The only sulphur used is to sterilise the bottles. Collett says fruit wines "are an entirely different product, not to be compared with mainstream wine".

Yet we continually compare mainstream wines to fruit, delighting in the aromas of plums, cherries, bananas, grapefruit, asparagus or dried apricot, to name but a few.

So, if you want to experience these pristine fruit flavours in all their primary glory, try some country wine. You'll be pleasantly surprised.

Frankston Amateur Winemakers Guild

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