Regional profiling: the McLaren Vale experience

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Members of the McLaren Vale Grape, Wine and Tourism Association have undertaken a critical self-analysis to identify ‘districts’ within the region, ultimately enhancing the storytelling to consumers about the region’s ability to produce distinctly terrior-driven wines.

Concepts such as regionality and terroir receive much attention in the wine trade and media. It has been suggested by many that to redefine the image of Australian wine internationally, the Australian experience and interpretation of regionality must be brought into greater focus. In my view, Australian winemakers have always understood these influences as being important. The desire of Wine Australia and others to bring regionality to the fore is no doubt based on an assumption that Australian winemakers understand their regions, and are able to tell a credible regional story about how this results in both higher quality and regionally distinctive wines. However, to me it seems likely that the strength of large (and often multi-regional) blends, and a focus on grape variety as the hero, have meant that it does highlight the fact that we have not thoroughly explained what we do know.

If we accept this premise that natural resource capital drives regional expression, what do we really know about our regions? How much is reality, and how much is unsubstantiated folklore? To maximise a region’s wine quality potential and tell a coherent story about its unique place in the wine world, a methodology to test current assumptions and provide a template for continuous learning would be a powerful tool.

With a vision to be the best studied and understood wine region in Australia, the McLaren Vale Grape, Wine and Tourism Association (MVGWTA) has benefitted from the accumulated experience of a wide group of individuals in developing a practical methodology for better understanding the region. Still very much in its infancy (it is accepted that it will never end) it may provide the stimulus for other regions to undertake such analysis and, as such, improve the visibility of Australian winegrowing expertise.

ADVANTAGES AND GOALS

A number of complementary projects aim to:
- develop a robust understanding of McLaren Vale based on fact, rather than folklore or assumption
- improve wine quality through greater understanding of the region's natural capital
- for all members of MVGWTA to be able to communicate the above with consistency
- develop marketing programs that highlight the depth of understanding of the unique attributes of McLaren Vale.

STEP ONE - GEOLOGY MAP

South Australia is fortunate to have extremely good geological mapping data. Armed with this, geologists Bill Fairburn, Jeff Olliver, Wolfgang Preiss and writer Philip White collaborated to improve upon Fairburn’s earlier geological map and accompanying text defining and describing the geological history of the McLaren Vale wine region. Published with the assistance of PIRSA and highlighting the geological diversity of the region,
the map provides an objective base from which to add further layers of complexity. Independent of soil or climatic factors, the geology map provides a clear picture of the framework from which the region’s landscape has evolved. Additional layers, such as soil, rainfall and temperature data, can be overlaid upon this geological map and, in many cases, the correlations (between soil and geology for example) are obvious. Publishing such overlays is a logical next step for the program, given the success of the original map as an information tool. The map is anecdotally the best selling map through the PIRSA office; 10,000 copies have been printed and sold or distributed. Such tools are effective because they are scientifically robust, positively showcase a region’s self-understanding and are an attractive, visual means of presenting the complexities of a natural landscape. Many consumers of this information do not wish to delve into the finest details, but what they are left with is a clear vision of a region that understands its landscape and seeks to learn more.

**STEP TWO - ‘DISTRICTS’**

While geology provides a basis for understanding a region’s formation, other factors also contribute to the present-day environmental components of terroir. Using geology as an objective base, a group of respected winemakers, viticulturists and geologists embarked on the task of defining where individual, distinct ‘sub-districts’ might occur within the region. The term sub-region was deliberately avoided, given its use as a legal term. Proposing official sub-regions is expressly not an objective of the project. Meetings and field visits were conducted over an 18-month period, and took into account geology, soils, topography, distance from the coast, temperature, rainfall, elevation, etc. Much of this data had been compiled during a previous regional profiling project that succeeded in accumulating all data available up until that date. McLaren Vale’s diversity was reflected in the classification of 19 individual zones or ‘districts’. These are not set in concrete and will be reviewed periodically for accuracy. Clearly, this level of detail is of more interest to producers than consumers, and in the future there may be opportunities to simplify broader trends for public consumption. However, the robust process and level of detail that has been invested in developing the ‘districts’ report again highlights to those outside the region that McLaren Vale producers regard understanding their region as being of vital importance.

Although examining such indicators as geology, climate, soil and topography is complex, it is probably the simplest part of the process over the long term. Lines on maps are one thing, but relating what is seen in the landscape to distinct characteristics in finished wines is quite another. What point is there, one may well ask, in distinguishing between ‘districts’ if the wine produced from them shows no difference in character?

**STEP THREE - ‘DISTRICT’ TASTINGS**

Most producers in the region hold strong opinions about the oenological strengths and distinct characters of certain parts of McLaren Vale. The next layer of regional profiling aims to examine these trends and build a knowledge base around a standardised methodology. Each year, MVGWTA members are asked to submit one-year-old Shiraz wines from single vineyard parcels, without the influence of new oak. Shiraz was the first variety chosen for assessment due to its dominance both in planted area and market recognition. A panel of respected winemakers, viticulturists and journalists taste the wines and collate flavour descriptors. It is envisaged that over time, this process will produce a database of tasting notes, from which it may be possible to identify distinct attributes of the wines made from each of the 19 ‘districts’. It may be that some adjacent ‘districts’ do not differ significantly, and this may be deemed grounds for amalgamation or shifting boundaries. Although it is too early to make definitive judgements, some very interesting trends have been observed; some expected and others that challenge traditional perceptions. A logical next step and improvement to the system would include sensory and biostatistician support to assist in structuring and evaluating the viticultural and oenological elements of the ‘district’ activity.

The intended outputs are marketing information, such as regional tasting notes and educational information, as well as facilitating better viticultural and winemaking decision-making. It is envisaged that the information generated through this process will, even in its raw form, be most useful for McLaren Vale growers and winemakers.

It has become clear that this process will assist in achieving the objectives of more robust regional understanding, and improving wine quality through more informed decision-making. However, the level of complexity and detail makes the raw data impractical for use in the trade, for example. How, then, are the objectives of a clear and consistent message that members might take into the wine trade met? How might the region begin to make the unique attributes of McLaren Vale Shiraz visible to consumers in a form they can taste, and in a way that exposes the depth of understanding present among producers?

Scarcely Earth is the vehicle that enables consumers to explore the region’s diversity and offers the opportunity for those among them who wish to delve more deeply to do so.

**STEP FOUR - SCARCELY EARTH**

The McLaren Vale Scarcely Earth initiative aims to encourage discussion and understanding about the unique attributes of Shiraz throughout McLaren Vale. Any member of MVGWTA may present single vineyard Shiraz wines to be tasted by a panel of three local winemakers and three independent panelists from the wine trade or media. The panel’s role is to ensure that wines selected for the program are free of overt winemaking influences, such as dominant oak, which may mask site expression. By highlighting the sub-district and vineyard each wine comes from, the program aims to provide a starting point for discussion about both regional character and the nuances of individual vineyards and sub-districts.

The wines chosen are able to use the Scarcely Earth label and participate in events, most notably a coordinated release (26 months after vintage) of the wines and a public tasting. The wines are available exclusively from cellar doors for three months following release, in an effort to encourage visitation to the region.

Showcasing flights of high quality wines is common. However, programs...
such as this with a structured methodology and that leverage a deeper understanding offer greater potential to tell a credible, distinctive story about a region. Again, the result is two-fold: influencers and consumers are offered a tangible experience and the ability to explore more detailed information if they choose. Most importantly, they leave with a clear impression that McLaren Vale producers seek to understand their region with an enthusiasm equal to that of any producer elsewhere in the world.

STEP FIVE – MCLAREN VALE SUSTAINABLE WINEGROWING

The key objective of McLaren Vale Sustainable Winegrowing Australia is to improve vineyard sustainability. The program combines data reporting, self-assessment via a workbook of viticultural practices and third-party audits. Chapters are written by local growers and peer reviewed by experts in each field. Chapters include: soil health, nutrition and fertiliser management, pest and disease management, biodiversity management, water management, waste management, and social (work, community and winery relations).

Importantly, while the system aims to collect data and measure performance, there is also a considerable focus on continuous improvement, with the workbook offering a pathway to improved performance that is tailored with consideration to the particular requirements of the region. Given that individual measures of sustainability vary in importance depending upon regional conditions, providing measures and solutions targeted at the regional level is the most effective way to both measure performance and encourage meaningful improvement. Uptake has been excellent, with 41 growers participating in last years’ trial program and many more eager to participate this season. A regional focus and the potential to improve business performance appear to be the drivers of adoption.

Program coordinator Irina Santiago clearly describes the objectives of the system: “Sustainability for us is about developing our vineyards, preserving and/or improving the land, increasing the quality of our grapes, meeting the requirements of the wineries, optimising the use of inputs relative to on-farm returns, and minimising potential negative impacts on the environment. The program also aims to promote regional social development and well-being of the people who live in our community.”

While on the surface none of these goals overtly aim to inform a greater understanding of regionality, much of the data collected shows all the signs of being a goldmine for future analysis. Having a platform through which the regional body can communicate with growers and easily collect information greatly enhances the ability to understand not only the natural resource base of a region, but also the human and operational factors that impact upon regional performance.

CONCLUSIONS

With 61 different regions in Australia alone, not to mention the hundreds throughout the rest of the world, telling a unique story about a region that gains any sort of attention requires more than just clever word-smithing and an advertising budget. In my view, only those regions that make the effort to understand the fine details of what makes them unique will command any sort of presence or ‘cut-through’ in the marketplace. If a region cannot demonstrate what makes it significantly different from its neighbour, in terms of both natural capital and in wine sensory properties, then any attempt at regionality-led marketing is likely to fail.

Regions will need to ensure their producers have access to relevant, factual information and be able to generate innovative ways to make the story come alive for consumers. Key influencers, particularly international buyers and wine media, have ready access to long-established international regions, and we in Australia need to illustrate that we understand our regions as well as our competitors understand theirs. We cannot hope to do that unless we have done the work to back-up what we often instinctively know.

By no means is McLaren Vale alone in its efforts, but I believe that the sort of multi-faceted approach described in this article may offer a template for other regions to better refine their self-understanding. If part of Australia’s wine future lies in telling a credible story about regionality, then gathering current understanding, identifying any shortfalls and continually striving to find out more should be at the forefront of our thinking.

For more information, visit www.mclarenvale.info

REFERENCES
