

Prize for a test of time

Huon Hooke

October 26, 2010 - 2:53PM



Two of the winning vintages of the Houghton Jack Mann Cabernet Sauvignon.

The industry's newest prize honours a vintage that keeps getting better with age.

It seems almost perverse to be writing about the most exciting new trophy in Australian wine shows in the week the long-established top award, the Jimmy Watson Trophy, is announced.

But I would nominate the Gramp, Hardy, Hill Smith Prize, awarded at the Royal Adelaide Wine Show for "an outstanding wine of provenance", as the country's most thrilling title.

Last year it was awarded, for the first time, to Wynns Coonawarra Estate John Riddoch Cabernet Sauvignon. This year the top prize went to Houghton Jack Mann Cabernet Sauvignon.

Advertisement: Story continues below

What's interesting is that this trophy isn't awarded to a single wine but to a run of three vintages spanning a considerable period. Wynns won with its 2006, 1998 and 1991 vintages of John Riddoch; Houghton won with its 2007, 2001 and 1994 Jack Mann.

The Houghton wine comes not from Margaret River, as you might assume, but from the Great Southern - specifically, the Frankland River sub-region.

The chairman of judges at Adelaide, Brian Walsh, describes the new prize as an award for "expression of place and winemaker's craft".

"We don't have an appellation control system in Australia but we are starting to recognise that there are natural appellations - rieslings from the Clare and Eden valleys, pinot noirs from Victoria and Tasmania and shiraz from everywhere," Walsh says.

The prize is awarded not by the judges of the annual Royal Adelaide Wine Show but by a special panel, this year comprising James Halliday, Brian Croser and Hong Kong-based master of wine Jeannie Cho Lee.

There were about 45 entries, narrowed down to five finalists and finally a winner.

"The vintages of Jack Mann, the 2007, 2001 and 1994, showed regionality, longevity and trueness to house style," Walsh says.

The chief winemaker at Houghton, Ross Pamment, says the prize is an honour as it recognises a wine's excellence across a number of vintages.

"What we are after with this wine is an outstanding expression of cool-climate cabernet and this award is a recognition of the quality of fruit produced in Western Australia's Great Southern region," Pamment says.

While most show awards are for infant red wines, this one recognises ability to age and develop over time. It's the new award's greatest strength. It also rewards wines for regionality ... for tasting of the place where the grapes are grown. And that is, of course, very of the moment.

The '07 wine is available for \$105 at Houghton's Swan Valley cellar door and selected retailers. Jack Mann isn't cheap but neither should it be, considering its quality.

Select offering

A few months ago I attended one of the year's more unusual tastings. Wynns' chief winemaker Sue Hodder and viticulturist Allen Jenkins invited trade and media representatives to help them decide which vintages to enter in the Gramp, Hardy, Hill Smith award.

One wine must be at least five years old, one at least 10 and the final one has to be the current release. Hodder was considering entering the 1990, 2004 and 2006.

The weak link seemed to be the 1990, which may have suffered cork variation, as the bottle we tasted was quite flat and earthy. I had tasted much better on other occasions. The '04 and '06 were under screwcaps and absolutely pristine.

The two younger wines are also in the reborn John Riddoch style, which is more elegant, less ripe and less oaky than the 1999 and earlier vintages.

They entered the '90, '99 and '06.

It takes some bottle to win the Watson

The 2010 Jimmy Watson Trophy, announced on Friday, went to Harvey River Bridge Estate Joseph River Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2009, from Western Australia's Geographe region.

There has been progress in transforming this atrophied trophy into one of relevance. For most of its 40-odd years, the Watson has enjoyed undeserved fame and has increasingly looked like a dodo.

Over the years, most wine shows have moved away from awarding unfinished wines but the Watson has doggedly remained an award that can potentially be given to an unbottled wine, a tank or barrel sample.

That's akin to a chef being given a prize for a heap of ingredients rather than a completed dish.

This year, they've changed the rules to include not only 2009 red wines but also 2008. Unbottled wines can still potentially win but are less likely to. For the past two years, the winners have been bottled wines. Eureka! Next year, it may become bottled wine only.

Despite the Watson's reincarnation, the Gramp, Hardy, Hill Smith Prize is still the wine award of the moment.

For the record, this year's Jimmy Watson Trophy winner is bottled.