

A ridge between ‘Malteseness’ and ‘Parkerisation’?

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The Denominazzjoni ta’ Origini Kontrollata or D.O.K. designation (similar to D.O.C. in neighbouring Italy) is attributed to those wines that classify in the category of wines produced conform with the protocol defining the permissible grape or grape varieties, where the grapes may be grown, as well as numerous details about the grape growing and winemaking process. Whereas the advent of the D.O.K. system is indisputably a laudable milestone for the Maltese wine industry and will possibly bestow Maltese wines deservedly with more consumer trust, it makes me wonder if the system will always succeed in encouraging all Maltese winemakers to produce individual wines with all their local character intact - which is after all one of the key goals of the system.

Will they pursue the quest for ‘*typicalness*’ or will Maltese wine producers (like so many others in the world) give in to the insidious trend of making ‘safe’ wines whilst replacing ‘*typicalness*’ by ‘*sameness*’ which nowadays seems to mean big and bold wines high in alcohol? Judging by the white wines that have been awarded the D.O.K. status, the amount of alcohol in a finished wine of Maltese origin of the 2007 vintage seems to have crept up with one to sometimes almost three per cent from a respectable average 11.5 - 12.5 % per volume previously.

Is this commendable?

Well, I am not out to routinely condemning rising alcohol levels in finished wine. After all alcohol is an important component of wine. Without it, all you have is unfermented grape juice. However, I uphold the view that the pursuit of more alcoholic wines leads to the diminishing of a taste that lets the individualities of specific regions shine through in favour of ‘*sameness*’. And, furthermore, I take issue with very alcoholic wines because such wines are often unbalanced and in any aspect don't usually make for good food wines. Obviously there are no valid blanket generalizations. It's all a question of where fruit, extract, tannin and alcohol converge and whether it's in the 'balance zone.' It's the vigneron's and winemaker's task to find the 'sweet spot' for the variety, vineyard, vintage and winemaking objective. A wine is neither good nor bad because it has high alcohol. Alcohol, high or low, is a component that marries with others to make a more enjoyable wine.

Here's my concern. The D.O.K. system introduced by Malta's Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment does not only put an emphasis on place. To a certain extent, it encourages winemakers to produce more of the same wines many consumers, international wine competitions and the media are attracted to: big, upfront and very alcoholic wines. The new Maltese appellation of origin system seems to encourage this right-in-your-face style by allowing winemakers to label their wines as ‘superior’ if the grapes at harvest time are sweet enough for the resulting wine in question to exceed a minimum alcohol level (12% for white wine).

One could therefore argue that the rising average alcohol level in Maltese white wines is in part a consequence of the vintners' empathy to comply with new D.O.K. regulations pertaining to the granting of so-called 'superior' status. Put differently, alcohol levels have and will move up if and for as long as Maltese winemakers believe printing the term 'superior' on labels makes their wines sell more. And, who can blame them? After all, both domestically as well as overseas, the market at large is still appreciating wines with higher alcohols. Unfortunately many wine consumers, especially those fairly new to wine, believe the 'stronger' wine to be better.

But bigger isn't always better – it's surely not always healthier. And, consumers should learn it's a misconception to link higher alcohol levels with better quality and better value for money. Vapours of alcohol are less complex than aromas of the more mineral, earth-bound, herb-laced wines that are more a reflection of their soil than they are of the hand of man and vines. I believe that production will swing back from these high alcohol wines. Somewhere there is a middle ground Maltese winemakers will need to find whilst trying to interpret the tiny Maltese vinescape. After all, given the economies of scale, Maltese winemakers will only be able to compete and sell their produce to discerning and adventurous wine enthusiasts on the basis of the uniqueness of the small quantities of wines they produce.

So, I feel winemakers should not race past that sublime spot where it's possible to make distinctiveness and '*regionality*' a positive factor. Chardonnay shouldn't be harvested so late or vinified in such manner that the resulting wine tastes like spiked sweet grape juice. Perhaps, today's jerk reaction for high alcoholic Maltese wine is just another ripple effect of the worldwide influence of influential members of the wine press with writers such as Robert Parker leading score-conscious winemakers to make very alcoholic wines.

Hence, one wonders if the first lot of D.O.K. certified wines is, in a strange and odd way, testimony of so-called 'Parkerisation' of Maltese wine rather than a crowning of their typical Malteseness?