



PARA PERFECT

BY VALMAI HANKEL

When the Foster's-owned Seppeltsfield winery came on the market a couple of years ago, we lovers of fortifieds worried about what the future might bring for the historic wines in the portfolio. Seppeltsfield's bluestone cellars hold about nine million litres of fortified wines, including stocks of Australia's greatest wine, 100-year-old Para Vintage Tawny. They certainly seem safe for the present. The newly-formed Seppeltsfield Estate Trust, with Kilikanoon Wines as the principal, bought Seppeltsfield in 2007. Other owners of the Trust are Kilikanoon CEO and famous cellist, Nathan Waks, Australian living treasure Janet Holmes à Court, Greg Paramor and Bruce Baudinet. Fortunately, James Godfrey, maker of the world's greatest range of fortified wines under the Seppelt label since 1978, is still shared with Seppeltsfield although employed by Foster's.

In 1878 Benno Seppelt put aside a puncheon (about 500 litres) of his best tawny port to celebrate the completion of new stone cellars and instructed that it was not to be bottled for 100 years. That wine, first known as Seppelt Para Liqueur Port, was released a century later for \$2000 a bottle. *Winestate* judges in 1978 gave it 20½ out of 20, and considered it "priceless". James Halliday has famously assessed the Para Vintage Tawny as "Australia's one and only 100 point wine".

The 32nd vintage came out on May 1, since last year known as Para Day. (Is it by coincidence or design that it's the same date as the annual release of Penfolds Grange? It also happens to be my birthday...) This Para Day I tasted the 1909. How to describe it? I found it an impenetrable dark green-brown, with a nose and palate of fruit cake, burnt toffee and dark chocolate, an unbelievably velvety mouthfeel, and a haunting, lingering finish. One of the staff told me, incredibly, "It's not to everyone's taste. Some find it too strong". The 1909 100-year-old Para Vintage Tawny will set you back a mere \$975 for 375mL or, for the next few weeks only, \$249 for 100ml (it will then be \$299). It might sound a lot, but if you get some friends to chip in a few dollars a week it becomes affordable and you are sipping one of the greatest wines ever made in this country if not the world, not to mention a piece of history. You can sometimes find other vintages at auction for a bit less. Or you may prefer to go on "The Legend of Seppeltsfield" tour where for \$59, among other delights, you get a taste of the 1909

Para – bookings are essential.

The fortifieds have had a major makeover in both presentation and price. Clear glass bottles have replaced the brown bottles. The three former 'sheries', now in 500ml instead of 750ml bottles, have been given new monikers and increased prices. Each is named after one of Benno Seppelt's daughters – Flora (the old fino, \$22), Clara Blanca (amontillado, \$26), and Vera Viola (oloroso, \$32). There is a new sibling, Selma Melitta (uscious, honeyed, finishing long and dry, \$40).

James Godfrey's superbly-crafted Rutherglen tokays and muscats also have new livery. The lowest-level tokays and muscats, now known as Cellar No. 6 and Cellar No.8 respectively, sell for \$20. Next up the ladder are the Grand (each \$32 for 500ml) and the Rare (\$59 for 375ml). They show a distinct progression in intensity and complexity.

Bottom-of-the-range of the fortified reds, Cellar No. 7 Tawny (\$20), displays the Seppeltsfield hallmark of balanced spirit and fruit, but without the complex rancio character of its siblings. Aficionados of the distinctively-shaped Para Tawny bottle will be horrified that the Para Grand Tawny (\$32) now comes in a very different-looking bottle. However, 1983 Para Vintage Tawny (\$80; 1987, \$75), the latest in the famous line which began in 1953 with the release of the 1922, retain the traditionally-shaped bottle. One of Australia's most awarded wines, DP 90 (500ml, \$69) is closer to the Portuguese style than most Australian tawnies.

There are some new fortifieds, among them the infant 2001 Show Vintage Shiraz (375ml, \$18); 1987 Show Vintage Touriga, with a dry finish (740ml, \$45); and an unusual lightly-fortified grenache rosé, The Ruby, sweet, ideally served on ice (750ml, \$20). And there is a new range, Paramount, limited and elite, in 500mL, including a tawny (\$349), muscat, and tokay (\$249).

Support the future of these classic Australian wines by buying them and enjoying them. It's not surprising that the new owners have whacked up the prices, as for years all the fortifieds were incredible bargains. They remain reasonably priced considering their quality. Don't be deterred by their alcohol levels – most are around those of some Barossa reds. Except for the vintage styles they are not intended to be kept, having done their developing before bottling.



Adelaide Review

June, 2009

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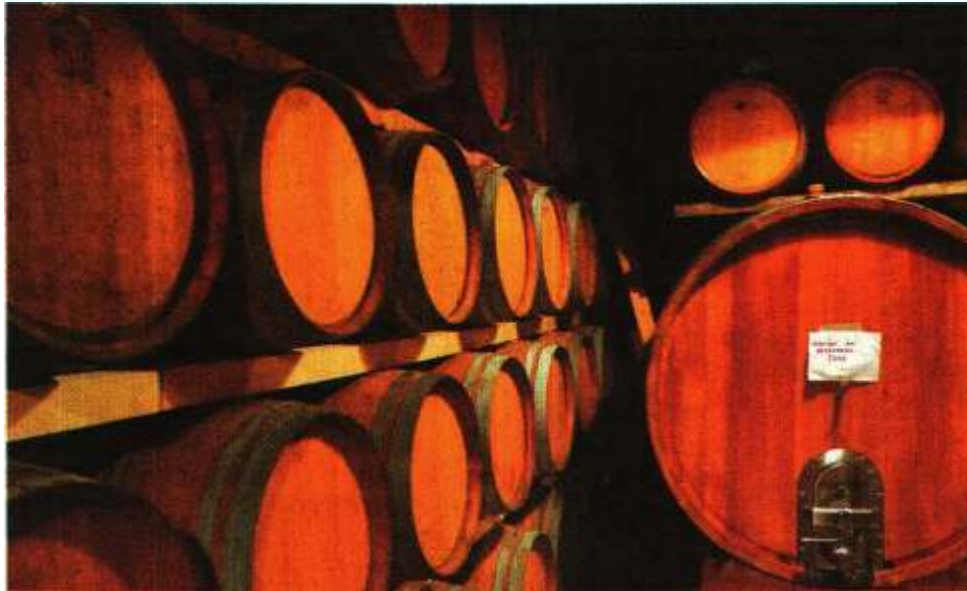
Section: Gene

Region: Adelaide Circulation: 28705

Type: Magazines Lifestyle

Size: 439.00 sq.cms

Frequency: Monthly



NOT JUST ANY PORT IN A STORM

Fashion is fickle and we are all swayed by what is riding the wave of popularity. Ports and fortified wines, once a staple of the Australian home liquor cabinet, have been overlooked in recent times, especially by younger drinkers. The demise of the after dinner port has not stopped passionate creators of great fortifieds continuing to blend and finesse their barrels and in celebration of these long standing wine making skills, LiebichWein in the Barossa Valley started a Fortified Festival.

The fourth festival takes place on June 21 and offers rare tastings of vintage museum wines from the Barrel shed. Enthusiasts are encouraged to bring along samples of their home barrel blends for advice from winemaker Ron Leibich and a chance at the prestigious Best Home Blend award. Ron, born and bred in the Barossa, was inspired at an early stage of his career to try his hand at sweet wines. "It was tasting Hardy's Fortified Verdelho at college that started my love affair with sweet white wines", says Ron. Association of the Liebich name with fortified winemaking in the Barossa goes back three generations to his grandfather Benno who established Rovalley Wines in 1919. Ron developed the famous Cobweb Port blend, a contemporary of Penfolds Club Port.

The fourth Fortified Festival is at the LiebichWein Vineyard and Cellar Door, Steingarten Road, Rowland Flat and will also feature local gourmet produce and home-made sticky date pudding to match the dessert wines, live music, a keg owner's workshop and activities for children.