

SAPERAVI

By Peter Dry

Viticultural Consultant - The Australian Wine Research Institute



AWRI

BACKGROUND

Saperavi (sah-per-AR-vee) is a very old variety from south-west Georgia, near the Turkish border. It was widespread in western Georgia by the 17th century as well as in the Kakheti region in the south-east of the country. Saperavi means 'dye' in Georgian, a reference to its black skin and pink juice. Synonyms include Kleinberiger, Nerki Khagog and Saparavi. There are currently 4751 hectares planted in Georgia where it is the third most important winegrape variety and makes up 10% of the national vineyard area. It is the main red wine variety and is said to be used for 80% of red wine production. It is the only variety used in many of the highly regarded appellation wines in Georgia. There are also 1514ha in Ukraine, 428ha in Kazakhstan, 716ha each in Moldova and Russia and small areas in Bulgaria, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Outside of the aforementioned countries, Australia may have the only commercial plantings: in 2013, there were 26 wine producers in 15 regions ranging from cool to hot, with most in the King Valley, Alpine Valleys and McLaren Vale. Saperavi has been in Australia since the mid-1970s but there was little commercial use until the late 1990s to early 2000s.

VITICULTURE

Budburst is early to mid-season and maturity is mid to late. Vigour is low and yield is moderate. Bunches are medium and loose with small to medium berries. Disease tolerance is high and it is very winter-hardy. Pruning is generally to canes but moderate yield is possible with spur pruning in Australia. Fruit hangs well on the vine but berries are prone to shrivel. Saperavi is a very polymorphic variety with a large degree of variation between clones—but at the present time there may be only a single clone (I11V10) in Australia.

WINE

Wines have good colour and acid, and are full bodied with supple tannins. Good flavour development is possible at moderate alcohol. It is a useful variety for adding both colour and acidity to blends. Ageing potential is good. Descriptors include floral (violets), dark fruits (blackberry, cherry), citrus and savoury. If the climate is too cool, wines may be excessively acidic and sappy. Australian consumer reaction has been very favourable.

For further information on this and other emerging varieties, contact Marcel Essling (marcel.essling@awri.com.au or 08 8313 6600) at The Australian Wine Research Institute to arrange the presentation of the Alternative Varieties Research to Practice program in your region.