

Flying in face of tradition

Scot broke the mould to forge a career in wine, helping struggling co-ops on to supermarket shelves then producing his own vintage

TOM BRUCE-GARDYNE

Traditionally there were two main styles of wine production in Europe – family estates and large co-operatives owned by hundreds or thousands of grape growers. Then in the late 1980s came the first flying winemakers, mainly from Australia and New Zealand. Typically they would be parachuted in to help a crumbling co-op in somewhere such as Sicily achieve its first listing in a supermarket.

Norrel Robertson is a flying winemaker from Forfar, which puts him in a minority of one. After a stint at Oddbins in Aberdeen, he moved to London, became a master of wine, and then settled in Catalayud in south east Spain in 2003. At the time the so-called Escocés volante, or flying Scotsman, was with a big UK supplier, in charge of production in the south of France and Spain.

"I picked up a map, looked at my wine projects, and decided Catalayud was the most central spot. Once I got to know the area, I guess I fell in love with it and the concept of making my own wine there. It felt like real virgin territory." For Robertson it had a combination of high

altitude vineyards at around 2500 feet, and a marginal, continental climate that offered potential way beyond what was being produced for drinking locally or as bulk wine for blending. In particular he fell for the region's old vine garnacha (grenache) – the more gnarled and twisted the better.

Sadly, the low yields that make this variety so attractive from a winemaker's perspective has left it vulnerable to EU incentives aimed at reducing production. "A lot of people where I live took the money and grubbed up their vineyards. Having an old vineyard of garnacha is a lot more work than having a hectare of almond trees," he says. Many left to join Spain's construction industry, but now the building boom has turned to bust, things may change. "You see a small return of people to agriculture, but it's going to take two generations."

Flying winemakers have been criticised for imposing a bland uniformity on wine: that to fly in, ferment the grapes, adjust the levels of sugar and acidity, season with a few oak chips, and then fly off again, is to create something that could come from



anywhere. Robertson believes there may have been a grain of truth in that 15 years ago, but feels the real standardisation was in improving things such as hygiene in the winery. If wines have become homogenised, he reckons it is down to the pressures of hitting certain price points in the supermarket. In the case of entry level bottles, he says "in most cases the raw material lacks any distinguishing character".

For his part, Robertson is more of a driving wine-maker, but then "volante" also means steering wheel, so it's a play on words. As well as making his own local stuff, he also produces wine from across Spain for the likes of Tesco and the Co-op. His latest project involves a Spanish verdejo and tempranillo for 'piggybank' wines, a new concept being rolled out in Waitrose. Under the banner 'generosity in every bottle' 50p of every purchase goes into the piggybank until it reaches £10,000 and is divided up between three worthy causes, which drinkers can vote on. ■

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Drink choices

1 FOR THE WEEKEND

Papa Luna 2010 14.5% Majestic Wine, £7.99

With a nod to the Rhone, Norrel Robertson makes this potent brew of garnacha, syrah and a few drops of monastrell (mouvedre) and mazuelo (carignan). The nose is ripe and jammy with the scent of black cherries and sweet spice, but the flavours are fresh and tangy with a subtle grip of tannin.



2 FOR THE WEEKEND

Piggybank Sauvignon Blanc 2011, Elqui Valley www.waitrosedirect.com, £7.99

As Piggybank becomes widely available I will review more in the range, but I was particularly struck by this searingly bright and intensely aromatic sauvignon from the Elqui Valley in northern Chile. It almost stings the tongue with its nettle, gooseberry fruit and crisp finish.



3 FOR THE WEEKEND

La Multa 2009, 14% Vino, Delivino, Henderson's and other good independents, £8.50

La Multa or "fine" is Robertson's tribute to the Guardia Civil – the Spanish cops who have booked him for speeding more than once. It is a generous, fleshy, no-nonsense garnacha that almost stains the glass purple. Expect lots of black plums and the odd spicy clove.



4 SPLASHING OUT

Sancerre Rose, Fournier, Les Chanvieres 2011, 12.5% Tesco, £10.99

Pink may not be the most serious colour, but there is nothing frivolous about this rose from the cool vineyards of the Loire. It is not quite as dry as those pallid pink wines from Provence, but has a little more fresh strawberry and redcurrant fruit, and perhaps a little more length.



BREWERY OF THE WEEK

Name Colonsay Brewery
Location Colonsay

Colonsay Brewery is a five-barrel plant on the eponymous island off Islay. It is the smallest island in the world with its own brewery. It was started in 2007 by three friends, Chris Nisbet, Bob Pocklington and David Johnston who in good Hebridean tradition have at least 10 jobs between them. Chris and Bob do the brewing meaning Colonsay Brewery employs roughly 10% of the island's workforce. Three core beers are produced, Colonsay Lager at 4.4%, Colonsay 80/-, 4.2% and Colonsay IPA 3.9% which you can find throughout Argyll, in Dobbies Garden Centres, and at Lockett Brothers in North Berwick. The brewery is looking for a Central Belt distributor.

TOMORROW IN THE SUNDAY HERALD: ANDY GEMMELL CONTINUES HIS GUIDE TO SCOTLAND'S BEST BARS