

BELLISIMO, BALLANDEAN!

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WITH proud Sicilian roots, it is no wonder Ray Costanzo is a champion winemaker, and now the Queensland maestro of alternative variety wines.

He hails from a very drinkable address on 337 Sundown Road, deep in Strange Bird wine country – that is, in the rural hamlet of Ballandean, a good 10 kilometres south of the granite town of Stanthorpe.

To visit Ray's cantina (winery), you need to stomp up to a glass of white vermentino (origins north-west of Sicily in Sardinia) or red nero d'avola, the hero red grape of the hot lands of southern Sicily, the Costanzos' homeland. See a 15-hectare vineyard ranging from two-year-old vermentino to 70-year-old muscat wines.

Ray is the next-gen, Charles Sturt University-trained (2002), flying winemaker son of Grace and Sam Costanzo, with the latter's parents establishing the grape and fruit producing property in 1946.

As the incumbent winemaker since 2002, taking over from his self-taught winemaking dad, Ray has appeared both measured and serious about the decisions and the impacts of rapid change down on his grape farm.

Fourteen years ago, Sam started planting new varieties,

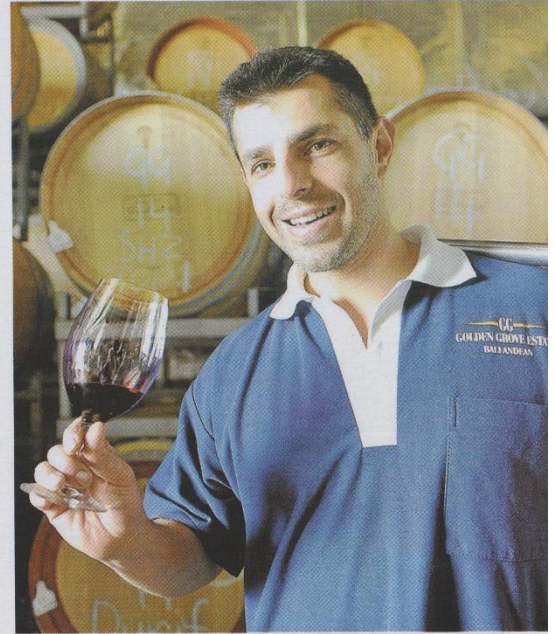
though leaving the traditional chardonnay, semillon, cabernet, merlot and shiraz in lesser quantities.

I have interviewed Ray several times in the past few years, and can only see that it is back to the future for this property. His Italian background, creation of Italian-origin wine varieties and injection of these into the Australian dining scene has been paramount.

As Ray says, "When winning yet another trophy, we sell more vermentino, nero d'avola and barbera by mail order to culturally aware restaurants in Melbourne, whereas still most Brisbane-based A-list osterias barely know we exist". The Strange Bird (Granite Belt wine industry alternative wine trail) grape variety planting and planning is not that odd, but a long time coming.

Italy produced two streams of Italian migrants – the first during 1911-1920 when a quarter of Sicily's agricultural capability left the island to settle in the US, Argentina and Australia. The second movement of Sicilian migration to Australia took place post-war.

In 1950s and '60s the Sicilian culture was not appreciated, yet today Italian food is the fastest growing food style in this country.



Golden Grove's Ray Costanzo, Ballandean, is leading the way with his Italian-origin wines.



Golden Grove Barbera 2013, 90 (13%), Granite Belt (\$24): Synonymous with all things Italian and the dishes we now eat of Italian origin – can be pizza, but a more sophisticated match is home-made or fresh pasta sauced with ham hock or beef cheek sauces, top-draw olive oil and garlic. Barbera is an excellent savoury, high-acid variety which loves to make your food taste better. It is a taste motivator. This pippy style from GG is excellent.



Golden Grove Durif Vintage Grand Reserve 2012, 97 (14.5%), Granite Belt (\$65): Travelling in the stratosphere among the makers of this style in Australia. Durif is rare – yes; is of French origin – yes; and grown predominantly around Rutherglen. The grape is at home around Ballandean, too, but makes silkier wines than the Victorians. It is deeply coloured and a powerful glassful, yet never let off the leash to look over-ripe or liquorice-like as in Rutherglen. All style. Visit www.goldengroveestate.com.au



Golden Grove Vermentino 2014, 90 (13.5%), Granite Belt (\$26): This wine was poured as the aperitif wine at the 2014 Noosa International Food and Wine Festival Top Tastes of Queensland, and how smart it was. Those attending were treated to a pale lime wine, leaping out of the glass with tropical, peach and ginger marmalade aromas. The Sardinians (home of vermentino) cannot get this deliciousness, for their climate is much hotter than the area around Ballandean. It is taut, mouth-filling and refreshing.