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The Sydney Morning Herald

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## Master at work

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March 24, 2008

Torbreck founder and chief

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winemaker Dave Powell has the gift of the gab. He speaks in a bluff, backblocks Aussie fashion and knows how to captivate an audience. His talk is as impressive as his bold red wines. Today, he is hosting a masterclass for the wine trade: young sommeliers, retailers and restaurateurs and one or two media representatives, in a private dining room in a quayside restaurant. Each is given a booklet in which to write their comments on the wines. It is beautifully presented. Quality cartridge paper; beautiful photographs of Barossa Valley vineyards and soils.

All earthy and natural, it puts you right there in the vineyards with the gnarled old bush vines and the gnarled old Barossa Deutsch characters who grow them. Powell has a yarn about each of them. Grapegrower Don Helbig, for example, is a "don" in the true sense of the word, a Yoda-type who acts as mentor to many of the leading growers in his area - the north-western sub-region of Moppa.

We taste two samples of wine off Helbig's vines: 2007 barrel samples of grenache and shiraz. The grenache is delicious; slightly animal to sniff, sweet-fruited and lushly confectionery-like in the mouth. The shiraz is darker, with earthy, pepper-spice and meaty savoury aromas and tastes; powerful yet elegant. They are two of the stand-out wines of the tasting.

And this is repeated for 11 growers (including several Torbreck-owned vineyards) in 11 sub-regions, from Lyndoch in the south-west heading up through Rowland Flat, Gomersal, Krondorf, Seppeltsfield, Marananga, Greenock, Moppa, Kalimna, Ebenezer and then a detour into the Eden Valley. Two wines from each, 22 samples - either a grenache and a shiraz, a mataro and a shiraz, or two shirazes - and with each pair, the grapegrower is given the kind of acknowledgement and respect, nay, reverence, that I seldom hear from other winemakers. The grapegrower is hero and the Barossa Valley the hallowed ground. It is a special experience, especially for the young greenhorns among the audience who have never experienced this kind of mastery before. Some are open-mouthed and silent, drinking it all in.

The wines are only infants, barrel samples all, from the 2007 harvest and only half-made at this stage. But you can taste and smell and see the potential in them, the quality, the

richness, the power and majesty. Many are fashioned from tiny yields from ancient vines, most between 50 and 120 years old, several from vines of unknown age. Another great grower is Ken Fowler at Gomersal, whose vineyards are of "unknown age - both planted prior to 1927 when records were established," says the booklet. Fowler's wines are ultra-ripe, luxurious and loaded with alcohol and glycerol. "Something off this vineyard goes into nearly every wine Torbreck makes," Powell says.

After 50 years, 82-year-old Fowler is looking to retire and Torbreck is gradually buying his vineyard. "When we've finished paying for it, we'll have paid \$2 million - 20 times what Ken paid for it 15 years ago," Powell says.

Another grower for whom he has unbounded respect is David Materne, at North Greenock. Here we taste a lush, peppery-minerally mataro and a profound, fleshy, superbly structured and magnificently complete shiraz. Age of vines? "Both planted prior to the Materne records which began in 1888," reads the booklet.

Powell's comments to the group accord with mine. "These could make single-vineyard wines," he says. "No need for blending. They're more complex and better rounded." Someone asks what he pays for A Class grapes such as these. "Four thousand dollars a tonne for the grenache; \$10,000 for the shiraz - probably \$12,000 this year," Powell replies. Breathtaking stuff.

Torbreck is one of a number of Barossa wines that get rave reviews from influential US critics, including Robert Parker. But Powell's regard for the critic is tempered by the fact that Parker also raves about some wines Powell dislikes because of their overripe dead fruit and excessive alcohol.

Does he have a limit for alcohol in his own wines? "You need to be pretty lucky to have a balanced wine at more than 15 or 15.5 per cent," he says. Likewise, he seems sceptical of the demand for organic and biodynamic wines. "In the US these days, you can piss in a bottle, call it organic and sell it."

His favourite sub-regions are in the north-western Barossa: the Seppeltsfield, Greenock, Moppa areas. But he also loves the Hillside vineyard at Lyndoch, at the far southern end of the valley. The shiraz here was planted in the 1890s and the wine is dense, chocolatey, berried and spicy with powdery tannins and a degree of elegance in spite of its richness. "This shiraz has always gone into RunRig," Powell says. RunRig is Torbreck's flagship wine, a shiraz viognier, which costs \$225.

With an unashamedly meaty lunch, we drink the new releases: '06 The Gask Eden Valley shiraz (\$75), '06 The Struie Barossa/Eden Valley shiraz (\$50) and '05 RunRig. I prefer the first two to drink now, although they'll be much better with two to 15-plus years of age. Perhaps it's the elegance of the higher-altitude Eden Valley grapes. RunRig is always the oakiest and most forbidding: cellar at least four years and drink for 20-plus.

Powell, as always, has the last word. "The Barossa is not just a place that makes big,

bombastic wines. There are differences." Sub-regional wines do echo the differences in site but the maker's signature also counts for a lot. For me, a Torbreck wine is first and foremost a Torbreck wine. And I have no problem with that.

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/03/24/1206206995977.html>*