

HUON HOOKE

WINE

The da Vinci mode

A European expert passes on his wisdom to Australian vineyards – to great effect.

ITALIAN winemaker Alberto Antonini reckons he can walk through a vineyard and tell whether the wine will be any good without even looking at the grapes. He notices the vigour and balance of the vines, the length of the canes, the thickness of the canopy. But the main thing is the woodiness of the canes – the branches that hold the bunches of grapes.

If the canes are green, the tannins in the fruit will be green and the wine won't be good. It won't taste ripe. If the canes are lignified, brownish rather than green, the grapes will have ripe tannins and flavours.

He combines winemaking with consultancy, with most of the latter in the vineyard rather than the winery. "A cook cannot make a good dish without good ingredients," he says.

Antonini is from Vinci, near Florence in Tuscany, but consults to wine producers all over the world – 14 in Argentina's Mendoza region alone. In Australia, he's been advising Pizzini in the King Valley for nine years and had a great deal to do with the improvement in its many Italian varieties. He advises the Chalmers family with the Murray Darling Collection Italian varieties, and works with Sandro Mosele at Kooyong, on the Mornington Peninsula, who makes the Collection wines.

Mosele is also the winemaker for Greenstone, the Heathcote vineyard where Antonini is part-owner with Mark Walpole, the Brown Brothers viticulturist, and London wine importer David Gleave, of Liberty Wines.

Greenstone has its first shiraz on the market and an outstanding debut sangiovese still in the barrel, made from three-year-old vines in the '07 vintage. It's too soon to be categorical but it's possibly one of the best sangioveses yet produced in this country.

The Greenstone shiraz, named after the jasper that can be found in the Heathcote vineyard's ancient red Cambrian soil, is a Heathcote shiraz with a difference. It has a spicier aroma than most, moderate alcohol and plenty of acid. That doesn't mean it tastes acidic, certainly not, but as Antonini says, "A wine has to have acidity to go with food. Low-acid wines may be OK as an aperitif but you need acidity with food."

To that end, he says, Walpole made a brilliant decision early on. The Greenstone vineyard was planted with rows that run east-west. All the others are north-south, Antonini says. Why is this significant? "With east-west rows, the sun doesn't heat the fruit on the west side of the canopy in the afternoon." Heathcote's afternoon sun can be very intense and this can result in jammy, cooked flavours in the fruit and the



At home . . . Alberto Antonini at his property in Tuscany; (below) the Greenstone vineyard.

resultant wine. Walpole was interested in spicy fruit aromas, not jam, and wanted to preserve the natural acidity of the grapes. And it works. The Greenstone wines are not jammy, they have more red-fruit and spice aromas and are more elegant than some in the region, with moderate alcohols and high natural acidity (that's 6.5 to 7 grams a litre of acid, pre-fermentation).

The Greenstone property was purchased and first vines planted in 2002, and the first wine released was 2005. It's good but the '06 is better and '07, judging by a barrel sample, looks better again: the wine is gaining richness, depth and flesh as the vines mature.

Antonini is a great fan of Heathcote. He loves the rich, red soil, which is very rare in the world. The fact that this soil has a neutral pH of 7, whereas most Australian soils are acidic, is important to him.

So far, half of the 40 hectares has been planted, mainly to shiraz (old clones chosen by Walpole), with some sangiovese, mataro and tempranillo. The planting density is high for Heathcote, too: 4500 vines a hectare. High-density vineyards have several advantages. The plants compete for nutrients, which helps control vigour and, while the yield of grapes on each vine may be

lower, the production in tonnes per hectare is maintained. Wine quality is improved.

It's early days for Greenstone but several excellent Antonini wines from his own vineyards in Tuscany, under the Poggiotondo label, are now available in Australia. The 2006 Poggiotondo Rosso Toscana IGT (\$19) is a fruity, blueberry-ish, lighter-structured red, based on sangiovese. The Poggiotondo Cerro del Masso Chianti 2006 (\$23) is more serious, deep, well-structured, fine and classic, and terrific value. And the Poggiotondo Chianti Superiore 2006 (\$27) is deeper again: fleshy, lush and full of dark fruits.

A wiry, fit-looking 48-year-old, Antonini runs marathons and employs 35 people in Italy in his consulting business. He thinks Australia is a paradise for winemaking because it is relatively free of the red tape that hamstring Italian producers. But, he warns, "Australia is too insular. It needs to welcome overseas influence."

Greenstone Heathcote Shiraz 2005 (\$34), distributed by Negociants Australia, (08) 8112 4210; Poggiotondo wines, distributed by JHL Wine, 0408 419 718.

