

The Grange custodian

The latest Penfolds Grange is being praised as one of the best ever. Christine Salins met the current winemaker behind the great label.

The 2004 Penfolds Grange, released in May after five years of maturation, carries a price tag of around \$550. It's been hailed as one of the best yet. On the secondary market, this iconic wine sells for thousands of dollars.

Why the mystique around a wine that a lot of people wouldn't be able to pick in a blind tasting? Winemaker Peter Gago says it's "all about storytelling ... sharing the bottle with someone for an occasion that can be talked about long after". But he says it is wrong to assume Grange has become purely an investment object.

"What we see at the clinics around the world is that it's 90 per cent drinking investment and 10 per cent pure money investment," Gago said. "Let me assure you, a lot of people do drink it."

Although the price dictates that only high-end venues stock it, Grange still has a presence on restaurant wine lists. While sommeliers usually opt for lesser known labels—customers don't want to see the same wine in a bottle shop next door for half the price—such is Grange's prestige and rarity that it warrants inclusion. And the mark up for prestige wines is often smaller, relatively speaking, than for other wines on restaurant lists, making them a good choice for a special occasion or someone who is out to impress.

Every year there's the same debate around the May 1 release—is it worth the price tag? Gago's hardly going to talk it down, but nor does he declare every vintage the best. He's chuffed with the 2004 release though. A blend of 96 per cent Shiraz and 4 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon matured for 16 months in American oak, he thinks it's "one of the best Granges in 25 years". "There's a beautiful poise to it," he said. "Like the '53, this will last 50 to 60 years easily. What makes it special?

The year. It's purely the year and the climate. It was the year everything came together, but it wasn't easy to find fruit. We had to search out parcels."

When released in 1981, the 1976 Grange was the first Australian wine to surpass the \$20 mark. Gago remembers it well. "I was living in Melbourne at the time, and I remember the 1975 being \$18.56 on the shelf, and the 1976 went to \$20.95. There was outrage at the time. If only you'd bought pallets."

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Gago has two personal cellars but admits even he can't afford to buy much Grange these days. Fortunately, he put some away when they were selling for a few dollars long before they fetched the extraordinary prices they do now and long before he joined Penfolds. "A lot of the Grange in my cellar I bought as a long-haired student at Melbourne University," he said.

Australia's most revered wine had been in the hands of only three winemakers before Gago became custodian of it—creator Max Schubert, Don Ditter and John Duval. Gago is fortunate to have met Schubert several times before he died in 1994.

Only three barrels were made of the first experimental Grange in 1951, with 1952 being the first commercial release. Gago joined the then Penfolds Wine Group as an oenologist in 1989, later joining the red wine department and working closely with Duval. He was appointed chief winemaker in 2002. "I had the world's best job. Now I have to be responsible."



Keeper of the Grange:
Winemaker Peter Gago.

Nevertheless, Gago finds it rewarding to be in charge of a wine that opens doors around the world. A large part of his job involves "flying the Penfolds flag globally" spending several months a year travelling. One reason for the heavy schedule is the Penfolds recorking clinic, that lets people bring their bottles of Penfolds wine to be assessed for free. The bottles are topped up, recorked and given either approval or the dreaded white dot. As part of the service 80,000 bottles have been recorked since 1991. "If there's a slight ulterior motive, we're taking bad wine out of the system," said Gago.

As Gago worked his way up the ladder at Penfolds, now part of Fosters, there was "always that fear you'll get more remote" from hands-on winemaking. As it's turned out, he still physically makes wine at Penfolds' historic Magill Estate.

Maintaining the style of Grange is his main objective. "It's never been a formula but by using different materials, vineyard sourcing ... you can change the blend a little. We maintain the house style but what we're trying to do is optimise it."

The challenge is to make a Grange better than the 1953, which he says was a brilliant vintage "not from a curio perspective but for pure hedonistic enjoyment". "I'm surprised [Grange has] been able to maintain that mystique over five decades and in a way that indicates it's something special, because the Australian way is to build something up and then cut it down."

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