



Semillon, seafood and snails

You'll find them on the menu at Hunter festival

JAMES LANE

As white wines go, semillon may not have the box office appeal of chardonnay nor the trendiness of viognier, but it is one of Australia's few top-notch classics.

The Hunter Valley, or more accurately the lower Hunter, is widely recognised as the country's leading producer of world-class semillon.

Renowned Hunter vigneron Bruce Tyrrell says semillon has many charms from its low alcohol and its natural affinity with seafood through to its ability to age and develop complex layers of flavour.

"(Hunter semillon) is one of my favourite wines in the world and is one of the few wines where Australia sets a benchmark for the style."

If that sounds like natural local bias then think again. British wine doyen Jancis Robinson has hailed Hunter semillon as "Australia's great gift to the world", while *Wine Spectator* went even further, ranking it as the nation's greatest white wine.

For those keen to gain a better understanding of this viticultural treasure, the upcoming Hunter Semillon and Seafood Festival, on April 18 to 20, is a great place to start.

Entering its seventh year, the 2008 festival will showcase over 150 Hunter semillons and meltingly good seafood prepared by top area chefs in addition to cooking demonstrations

by Justin North of Becasse restaurant and TV food presenter/chef Peter Howard.

Hunter Valley Vineyard Association business manager Rowena Hawkins says this year's festival will feature casual farmhouse-style lunches, vertical tastings, degustation dinners, educational workshops, local cheeses and olive oils plus live entertainment.

Hawkins suggests the best way to get to grips with semillon is to enrol in a masterclass with no better way to learn than from winemakers.

Masterclasses will be held on Saturday, April 19, with each session featuring a panel of winemakers and six different semillons for tasters to compare for differing varietal characteristics.

Hosting the events will be Hunter legend Karl Stockhausen, who brings more than 40 years' experience to his craft.

There will be gourmet seafood *festival*.

aplenty, but one of the festival's quirkier menu offerings will be escargot or snails, supplied by farmers Helen and Robert Dyball.

The Dyballs' business, Snails Bon Appetite, is pioneering one of Australia's only commercial snail farming networks in Australia which produces and supplies snails to the Hunter region and throughout Australia.

While escargot doesn't fit under the banner of seafood, snails are a mollusc and their texture is similar to squid even if their taste isn't flavoured by the sea.

However, if you think that snail farming is a matter of plucking one from the garden and cooking it up then think again.

Helen Dyball says growers follow strict farming guidelines to ensure healthy, toxin and chemical-free snails are produced fit for consumption.

She believes much of the resistance to eating escargot is mind over matter.

I tested out this theory over a paella of snails, peas, chicken and chorizo prepared by Hunter chefs Andrew Clark (Rock Restaurant) and Andy Wright (The Cellar Restaurant).

The verdict? The snails ably complemented, rather than dominated, the other ingredients for a delicious twist to a classic Spanish dish.

The Dyballs say they plan to start supplying gourmet gastropods to countries like Dubai and would one day love to crack the holy grail for snails - France.

For those keen on a gastropodic adventure, chef Matt Dillow from Calais Estate's The Verandah Restaurant will be presenting a snails linguini dish as part of next month's festival.

Bon appetite!



TABLE SERVICE: Matt Dilow, from Calais Estate's The Verandah Restaurant, will present a snails linguini dish at next month's festival.

THE NOSE KNOWS: TV presenter and chef Peter Howard will do cooking demonstrations at the weekend festival.

IF YOU GO:

Festival entry is \$20, which includes a souvenir wine glass, semillon tastings, masterclasses, cooking demonstrations, entertainment and entry into a major prize draw. A premium package is available for \$80. Bookings can be made through www.ticketek.com.au

For further information visit www.huntersemillonand-seafood.com.au or call (02) 49 914533.

For information on Snails Bon Appetite visit www.snails.com.au

■ The author was a guest of the Hunter Valley Vineyard Association.



TASTE SENSATION: The Lower Hunter is the place to be for the best in semillon and seafood on the weekend of April 18 to 20.