



# MIGHTY MANSENG

## - THE CHALLENGE

WORDS DAN TRAUCKI

**T**here are two variants of the French native white variety, Manseng, as well as a red variant (of which there are only around 50 hectares in the world). Petit Manseng has small, thick-skinned berries, producing excellent wines; Gros Manseng produces bigger berries and a heavier crop and unless kept in check, produces a more commercial wine.

According to *Which Wine Grapes are Grown Where* by Kym Anderson (University of Adelaide Press), globally in 2010, there

were 1,327 hectares of Petit Manseng (ranked 228th most-grown winegrape variety) and 4,995 hectares of Gros Manseng (108th).

Well, well, “*quelle surprise*” – surprise, surprise – guess what? In May 2020 the CSIRO discovered that the original cuttings of Petit Manseng that arrived in Australia in 1979 were actually Gros Manseng, not Petit Manseng.

This is the sad Albariño/Savagnin story all over again, in that we think we are getting cuttings of one variety only to be advised

further down the track that what we were shipped, was a different variety. In this case it took 40 years for the blunder to be discovered. As it turns out, all those fabulous Petit Manseng wines we have been drinking and enjoying (and which I wrote about in the May-June 2016 *WBM*) over the past few decades were in fact Gros Manseng.

That’s no biggie as it is the same delicious wine that tastes just as delightful as it did before, *but* the chaos and confusion of the renaming will significantly hamstring the



evolution and success of the variety in Australia. Potential new consumers will naturally shy away from anything called Gros. The connotation of Gros versus Petit is massive. Petit means small and elegant while Gros means big and fat. Mind you, it is still the very same wine we have been enjoying for yonks.

Gros Manseng is grown mainly in southern France where it is predominantly used in blended wines. In Jurançon and Béarn it is used to produce dry white wines, whereas in Gascony it is also used in making the delightfully sweet *Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh*. The appellation, Vins de Pays Côtes de Gascogne, is a large white wine growing area to the west of Toulouse, that produces around 100 million bottles of wine a year, of which Gros Manseng represents six to 10 percent.

The juice of Gros Manseng (unlike other white varieties) is slightly grey which leads to a deeper, yellower, more golden colour. Its thick skin means that it requires plenty of TLC and attention to detail in the vinification, as rough handling will lead to high phenolics and tannins, making it a coarse or rustic wine. Which, given rustic production methods employed in the past in rural France, would explain why Petit Manseng is more highly regarded than Gros Manseng.

Gros Manseng wines have vibrant floral and fruit aromas and flavours, usually described as floral, spice, pear, quince and apricot. They are medium-bodied to full-bodied depending on when the grapes are picked. The variety's high acidity balances out the richness to produce well-rounded, elegant wines. Harvest date plays a key role in the style. Earlier picked, ergo lower alcohol wines, are lighter and brighter with more florals, whereas wines made from later picked grapes tend more towards intense and powerful with the richer quince, pear and apricot aromas and flavours.

Until discovered to be in Australia, Gros Manseng was not known to venture to other lands. The Manseng that spread to California and Uruguay is, of course, Petit Manseng.

In Australia there are 23 Manseng growers/producers, of which less than half submitted samples for the tasting. I'm not sure if that is due to too much Christmas cheer or reticence to be part of the name confusion. Those who did send samples submitted some cracking wines that amply demonstrated that once the kerfuffle settles

down, Manseng potentially has a great future here. A special thanks to New England's Topper's Mountain who supplied four samples spanning a decade back to 2012.

**Crittenden Estate King Valley "Los Hermanos Saludos"** (the brother's cheers) **Gros Manseng 2021**. A frizzante wine. Lovely and fizzy with a hint of nuttiness on the bouquet and zesty lime flavours on the palate. Oh, so refreshing and glugable.

**919 Wines Riverland Gros Manseng 2022**. While still young, it is in the bigger, richer style with great depth of attractive flavours and zesty acidity on the finish. Would love to try it again with three to five years of age as I think it would be divine.

**Gapsted Wines Alpine Valleys Secret Harvest Grand Manseng 2022**. Love the use of 'Grand' in the name. Cool climate but later picked, making it a classy, appealing wine with dainty pear flavours.

**Symphonia Wines King Valley Manseng 2021** alongside the **2016** vintage. The youngster is attractive with a bouquet of florals, pears and melons. A splash of fruit sweetness on the front palate with lashings of flavour. The elder (2016) amply demonstrates the benefits of cellaring this variety for a while. It is bright, light golden yellow with complex maturation characters and a smidge of the pears and melons one would expect. The palate is simply divine, silky-smooth, rich, mouth-filling and well rounded. Marvellous.

**Symphonia Wines King Valley Royal Late Harvest Manseng 2021** along with the **2018** vintage which won gold at the 2018 Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show. They are both nectar of the gods with the 2021 still being a smidge tight, but superb nonetheless – just have patience and it will blossom magnificently. The 2018 has already become a deep golden colour, with an alluring bouquet of ripe peaches, pears and a hint of honey. The palate is exquisite, very sweet, oh so round and tasty, packing power and richness without cloying. Absolutely magnificent.

**Fighting Gully Road Beechworth Gros Manseng Moelleux (375ml) 2021**. A gorgeous dessert wine with mellow aromas of peaches and nectarines. A divinely sweet mouth-filling palate with honey and nut characters that do not cloy. Yum.

**View Wines Granite Belt Gros Manseng 2021**. A cool climate wine that has attractive hazelnut and floral aromas and bouquet. Has

stacks of flavour and is well balanced with a refreshing finish.

**Word of Mouth Wines Orange District 1K High Manseng 2022**. A superlative sweet (spatlese) style with alluring florals, a splash of passionfruit and rock melon on the bouquet and sweet rock melons on the delicious palate. Perfect for spicy Asian food.

**Topper's Mountain** from New England sent along their **2021 Manseng, 2017 Petit Manseng** (as it was then called), **2016 Wild Ferment Petit Manseng** and their **2012 Wild Ferment Petit Manseng**. The evolution of the house style is evident across this decade of Manseng. The youngest is bright, tight and restrained, needing some time to bloom and show what it is really capable of. The 2017 is blossoming with hints of maturation characters and complexity leading to an appealing, slightly nutty-tasting finish. The 2016 has a slightly funky bouquet from the wild yeast fermentation and still has a degree of the crisp acidity of its youth left. The 2012 is truly sublime with a slightly funky wild ferment bouquet. Rich and round with lashings of flavour and silky smooth. Aging brilliantly. Perfection at 10 years old.

In our tastings we usually come across a few wines that are out of character (typicity) or just simply lack appeal. This was not the case here: every wine was well worth consuming.

Back to the name issue. I initially suggested to the producers I spoke to they should simply call it 'Manseng', as there is no Petit Manseng (to my knowledge) in the country. However, research shows there are a number of Petit Manseng wines on the international stage that are simply labelled as 'Manseng' which would therefore cause a problem and add to the confusion.

So perhaps we should name the wines made from Gros Manseng as 'Mighty Manseng' or as Gapsted Wines have, 'Grand Manseng'. It would make it sound more attractive to newbies without breaching any of the international rules. Food for thought as the producers wrangle their way through this nightmare scenario, to hopefully emerge with viability for this attractive and exciting white variety. ♦

*DAN TRAUCKI is a wine journalist and a wine industry consultant specialising in assisting with exports to Asian markets. Email dan@wineassist.com.au.*