

Messenger in a bottle

You don't get paid to judge wine, but it has its own rewards.

Judging at wine shows isn't a lot of fun. Sure, you get to interact with talented winemakers and other wine types, so you're always learning, and the social engagements that follow judging day are always a good time.

A typical wine judging day at the recent Royal Melbourne Show began at 9am and finished about 4pm. Between these hours the panel I chaired assessed between 150 and 180 wines a day. Judging ran from Monday to Thursday.

It wasn't until day four – Thursday – that I got really excited about a glass of red: it was exhibit 41 in Class 38. I gave it 19/20: a really strong gold and my highest points of the week. It was a peppery, slightly pongy (in a good way) '06 shiraz from who-knew-where and, fortunately, the other judges favoured it also; so it went through as our "top gold" to be tasted off against the golds from the other half of the class judged by the other panel.

This is where it gets interesting. The other half also contained a seriously smart, peppery shiraz from the '07 vintage and it had strong support from the other panel's judges, led by PJ Charteris, the winemaker at Brokenwood.

Both judging panels favoured their top selections, but the panels (six judges in total) agreed both wines were exemplary.

The casting vote came from the chairman of the show, Steve Webber (chief winemaker of De Bortoli, Yarra Valley) who favoured the '06.

About a week later, the results were through and you could have knocked me down with a feather of pleasure: 2006 Juniper Estate Shiraz. From one of the coolest-ever vintages in Margaret River (perhaps a reason for the surfeit of pepper), and crafted by one the warmest, most agreeable winemakers you will ever encounter, the youthful – he's now 45 – Mark "Mess" Messenger.

Few know as much about shiraz in "Margs" as Mess, who began his career at Cape Mentelle with the '91 vintage, departing for Juniper Estate in 1998.

So what was the other wine that was in contention for the top gold? The Juniper Estate Crossing Shiraz '07 – Juniper Estate's second label. This is when you go "yay" for the winemaker again, but also applaud the judges for exhibiting such consistent good taste.

As well as crafting stunning

cabernet sauvignon (see What to Drink), and some pretty handy chardonnay and semillon-sauvignon blanc, Messenger has worked hard with the winery's shiraz. It's nearly all in the vineyard, says the winemaker.

"We've had to work even harder on shiraz than cabernet sauvignon," says Messenger.

"Crop thinning makes all the difference, as does leaf plucking. But you've got to be careful because you lose brightness of fruit with too much exposure: you get a dried fruit character."

Well he's certainly got it right in two wildly contrasting vintages: '06 super cold, '07 perfectly warm. Both wines, though, are connected by bright and spicy, emphatically shiraz fruit. Both wines are delicious, balanced reds to drink, not the show monsters of yore.

The '06 has also picked up the so-called Rhône Trophy (an unlikely name for a trophy awarded to an Australian wine).

Messenger is elated and surprised, and commented with typical modesty and good humour: "2006 was a challenging year – I'm sure it only did well in Melbourne because it looked like it came from Victoria."



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Juniper Estate's Mark Messenger

Two things to take from this. Nice guys can come first: if Mess were a mere 10 years younger, he'd be the winner of every young gun award around. Second, there is a high degree of objectivity in wine assessment when it's conducted by professionals who know what they're tasting and talking about.

Actually, there's a third thing. Even though you don't get paid to judge wine shows – a disgrace, given wine show societies rake in hundreds of thousands of dollars through entry fees – sometimes they are worth the effort.

WHAT TO DRINK

Juniper Estate Cabernet

Sauvignon 2007 (Marg River, WA)

Smells of red dirt, pure currant, fruitcake, fine oak and marzipan: all beautifully integrated and constantly evolving as it sits in the glass. Has excellent density on the palate: fabulous fruitcake and chocolaty flavours bound up in long, intense, emphatically cabernet tannins. Coal dusty and finishing mouth-watering and dry as a chip. Needs another few years. 94(95)/100, \$49.

Juniper Crossing Cabernet

Sauvignon Merlot 2007

Emphatically Margaret River: super-slick currant smelling and deep, with some bay and cedar cigar box. In the mouth: cassis stuff and oozing fruit quality. Superb value. 92/100, \$21.

Juniper Estate Shiraz 2005

This is developing and has deep earthy plummy, soy cedar spice on the nose – this would be great with a duck pie. Juicy, mouth-filling and crisp in the mouth with crunchy tannins and aromas of licorice and black pepper. Chewy and dry to close: all about sapidity and spice. 94/100, \$37.