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How an ancient Spanish grape captivated two WA winemakers

The latest, limited release from Mazza Wines could be described as one part love affair, one part obsession.

Max Allen [[by/max-allen-gt1sah](#)]

Drinks columnist

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Fifteen years ago, Mazza Wines founders David Mazza and Anne Salathiel were sitting on their verandah near Donnybrook in south-west Western Australia, enjoying a glass of wine with a guest, when suddenly David remembered something intriguing.

Anne was studying viticulture and oenology at the time. Their guest, her lecturer, was visiting to check out their newly planted vineyard, spread out before them.



The Mazza Wines vineyard in Donnybrook, Western Australia.

“We were swapping stories,” she says, “and he told us about how he’d travelled around the south-west with a French ampelographer [grapevine specialist]. They were somewhere near Donnybrook, he said, when they had to pull over on the side of the road for a pit stop.

“The next thing he knows, this French guy emerges from the bushes and says, ‘Oh my god, I’ve just seen some grapes growing in there – it’s an ancient white Spanish variety that I haven’t seen for years and years!’”

The lecturer and his French friend were in such a rush to get to their next appointment they forgot the location of this remarkable discovery: an obscure Spanish grape seemingly growing wild in the Australian bush.



Anne Salathiel and David Mazza: They fell in love with the wines of Spain and Portugal while living overseas in the late 1990s.

But David Mazza knew exactly where the spot was. He'd grown up in the area, the son of Italian migrants who made their own wine at home – which is partly why he and Anne had bought their property and planted vines themselves in 2002. The vines the ampelographer had stumbled upon had been planted in the 1930s by a Sicilian neighbour, who – like David's grandfather – had brought cuttings with him in his suitcase.

“Old Dominic had an apple orchard on his farm,” says David. “He planted his vines along the roadside verges. I remember as a young man pulling in to his place to pick apples every April, and passing those vines.”

The couple were looking for a white grape variety to plant in their new vineyard. They'd fallen in love with the wines of Spain and Portugal while living and working in London together in the late 1990s and early 2000s, taking trips to Rioja and the Douro Valley. They had managed to find cuttings of some of the red varieties they'd tasted over there, growing in West Australian vineyards: bastardo, tempranillo, touriga, graciano, and so on. But none of the whites.



Bunches of exotic grapes at Mazza Wines. “When we started selling our wines, people would avoid us at wine shows,” says Anne. “They’d be like, ‘Oh my god, what is that? I can’t pronounce any of those grapes.’”

Here then was an opportunity to plant not only a Spanish white variety, but a grape that perhaps no one else was growing. So, a few years later (after life – and children – had got in the way), David went looking for those forgotten vines.

“Old Dominic had passed away long before, and most of the place had been cleared of trees and subdivided,” he says. “But the vines were still there, under all the bracken and overgrown trees.”

We were the only silly buggers to go completely alternative off the bat.

— David Mazza, winemaker

David pushed through, ignoring the snakes, and took cuttings.

To make sure the ampelographer's rather hasty and distracted visual identification was correct, the couple then decided to have the variety DNA tested.



David extracating planta fina vines from beneath a mass of overgrown bracken.

“I got this guy from the Ag department out to give me a hand,” David says. “He took a sample with tweezers and handed it to me and said, ‘Well, we don’t do DNA testing in Australia any more.’ So, I had to send it to a lab in Paris. And when it came back, we found out it was indeed the Spanish grape planta fina.”

“It was amazing,” says Anne. “It was like getting your envelope from the lotto.”

The couple took about 20 cuttings from the old vines, propagated them, and started planting them out in their own vineyard in 2017. A couple of years later, they picked their first meagre crop – enough for four bottles. The next vintage yielded 10 dozen bottles they tried out on family and

friends. And last year, the young vines produced enough fruit for the first – albeit painfully limited – commercial release (reviewed here).

Since the couple started on their long *planta fina* journey, further international DNA investigations have revealed that the variety is genetically identical to a Portuguese white grape called *alicante branco*. That adds an extra layer to the Iberian focus in the Mazza vineyard.

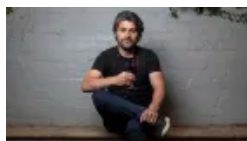


Anne with Mazza Wines' 2021 *planta fina* harvest, which they propagated from the original roadside cuttings.

But *planta fina* also turns out to be identical to a white grape called *damaschino*. That grape originally comes from Sicily, the place old Dominic left in the 1930s for his new home in the rolling country around Donnybrook, on the other side of the world.

It's a particularly poignant tale from Australia's migrant past because, after David took the cuttings, those old *planta fina* vines were pulled out, victims of council roadside clearing.

When David and Anne started the Mazza brand 20 years ago, not many wine producers were branching out into non-mainstream varieties in Western Australia – and almost no one in Australia was specialising solely in Spanish and Portuguese (or even Sicilian) grapes.



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“We were the only silly buggers to go completely alternative off the bat,” says David.

The risk has paid off because the varieties they planted – particularly tempranillo – have become much more familiar to curious consumers over the intervening decades.

“It’s been amazing to see the progression,” says Anne. “When we started selling our wines, people would avoid us at wine shows because they’d be like, ‘Oh my god, what is that? I can’t pronounce any of those grapes.’ And now, all these years later, nearly every restaurant you go to has a tempranillo on the menu.”

Mazza’s Iberian obsession



2021 Mazza Planta Fina [Geographe]

It's always tempting, when you taste a wine for the first time that's made from a grape you've never tried before, to compare it to other, more familiar grapes – or drinks – to find a point of reference. To me, this tastes a bit like a young Hunter semillon in its powdery refreshing crispness and its hint of green pineapple tang, but there's also a nice textural quality to the mouthfeel, like old-fashioned cloudy lemonade.

\$28

2021 Mazza Bastardo Rosé [Geographe]

Also known as trousseau in the Jura region of France, the red bastardo grape produces snappy, edgy, lighter-bodied but intensely flavoured red wines – as well as being used in port production in Portugal. David and Anne discovered early on that it also makes great pale, dry rosé: really fresh, savoury and snappy. **\$28**

2018 Mazza Touriga Nacional [Geographe]

Best known in Portugal as one of the main red grapes in port, touriga is

also increasingly finding its way into really characterful, vibrant, dark red unfortified wines. This is a terrific example, with loads of bold purple fruit, some lively sweet spice, and a lifted, pretty, floral character that I often find in wines made from this variety. \$32 [mazza.com.au](https://www.mazza.com.au/)
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