

Missing skin contact in a time of social isolation? Try these wines

Ah, the irony – the coronavirus pandemic could well lead to a boom in skin contact varietals.



Kathleen Quealy, right, of Quealy Winemakers making her skin contact wine. **Adrian Lander**

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If only I'd known it was going to be my last fancy restaurant wine lunch for the foreseeable future, I would've got drunk. Or drunker.

Can you blame me? The venue was Grossi Florentino, Melbourne temple to fine Italian dining. There was the best plate of spaghetti and big fat prawns I've ever eaten. Succulent plump roast duck. Twelve glasses of gorgeous, fragrant textural wines from – as well as some inspired by – the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region in north-east Italy.

And there were people! Eating and drinking together. Three big tables, everyone sitting closer than 1.5 metres apart. Even occasionally ... touching. A handshake. A kissed greeting. A hug.



Grossi Fiorentino - before the pandemic.

This was only a few weeks ago, early March, but it feels like a different lifetime, in a different universe. Fittingly, the wines – or some of them, at least – were decidedly unconventional skin contact varietals: cloudy, deep amber-coloured, made from white grapes macerated on their skins for days, weeks, months.

The lunch was hosted by Mornington Peninsula winemakers [Kathleen Quealy and Kevin McCarthy](#), along with Italian specialist importers [Trembath & Taylor](#), and [Giorgio de Maria Fun Wines](#). All have an abiding passion for these unusual styles, particularly those made from north-east Italian white grapes such as ribolla gialla and the fabulous friulano.

Kathleen and Kevin were inspired by the glories of skin contact white wines when they visited innovative winemakers in Oslavia, in Gorizia, on the Friulian border with Slovenia, in 2006. They started making their own skin contact wines back on the Mornington Peninsula the following year.



The Red Hill vineyards of Quealy Wines. **Adrian Lander**

At the time, I described these first experiments (in my 2010 book, *The Future Makers*) – Pobblebonk, a co-fermented, wild yeast blend of chardonnay, pinot gris and viognier, and Claudius, an amber-coloured cloudy blend of chardonnay, gewürztraminer and muscat grapes left for four months on skins – as “hugely important, brave and inspirational”.

Remarkably, Kathleen and Kevin soon found someone growing friulano in Mildura, in north-west Victoria, and started grafting cuttings in their own vineyard.

“It took us a while to understand friulano,” says Kathleen. “When it grew its first crop, it had lots of these really big bunches, and I thought it was going to be like semillon. Then we learnt you needed to go through early in the season and take some of the young bunches off, and make sure every berry is exposed to the light, to get this sun-kissed taste.

“You need to let it ripen fully – we pick it in late April – so it can make wine with this savoury, umami, chicken stock, almond milk character. I love it. It’s a little bit peasant.”

Nobody in the wine trade or restaurants knew anything about these styles at the time. But since then, people have begun to understand them.

— Michael Trembath

At the same time as Kathleen and Kevin were starting to make skin contact wines and exploring friulano, importer Michael Trembath was falling in love with the textural, multi-layered white wines he was finding on his own regular trips to Friuli.

“I got together with Kevin and Kathleen in 2007 and we did a tasting of a few bottles,” he says. “Nobody in the wine trade, in restaurants, in retail, really knew anything about these styles at the time. But since then, people have learnt about them, and begun to understand them.”

And now, thanks to people such as Giorgio de Maria importing some of the cult names like Princic from Friuli, they’ve become quite trendy.



Kevin McCarthy and Kathleen Quealy of Quealy Wines. **Adrian Lander**

Kathleen Quealy reckons the time has definitely come for skin contact whites. In fact, when I spoke to her a month after that last lunch at Florentino, she reckoned it might even have something to do with the pandemic lockdown. “I’ve had more people phoning me looking for skin contact wines in the last three or four weeks than ever,” she says. “They’re out there, stuck at home, thinking about what to drink, and they’ve come across this new style of interesting wines that are affordable, and they’re ordering them.

“I think COVID-19 could see the birth of a real interest in skin contact.”

Now wouldn't that be ironic?

Need to know

Since that lunch in March, the lockdown has hit wholesale wine sales to restaurants and to consumers, through cellar doors, hard. But businesses have been quick to adapt.

Because 80 per cent of their normal sales are to restaurants, Italian wine importers Trembath & Taylor have been doing it very tough over the past few weeks. But they also

have an [online store](#) – selling direct to consumers, and are now offering a 20 per cent discount promotion (the promo code is FORTE) and free delivery for orders over \$250.



Although the Quealys' cellar door is now closed, wines can still be ordered online. ***Adrian Lander***

Giorgio de Maria has moved from being a wholesale distributor only to also offering his (generously discounted) portfolio of wines – and beers, meads, liqueurs and olive oil – [online](#) direct to consumers. Giorgio is also active on [Instagram](#), where he's fond of dressing up and making silly videos – and will begin doing wine classes over Zoom in May.

And although [Quealy Wines](#) has had to stop doing tastings at its popular cellar door on the Mornington Peninsula, customers can still order online for pick-up (if you're a local) or delivery, which is free for orders of six bottles or more. Now's the time, as Kathleen Quealy says, to explore the joys of skin-contact for yourself.



Three faces of friulano

2018 Ronco dei Tassi Friulano [Collio]

This beautiful expression of the white friulano variety is made conventionally: just the juice of the grape, fermented and aged in stainless steel, with a small portion in old barrels. It's pale, bright, tangy, with fresh soft apricot fruit and a touch of creamy texture – like rice-water on the tongue. Delicious. **\$42**, imported by trembathandtaylor.com.au

2016 Dario Princic Jakot [Gorizia]

This extraordinary wine is made from friulano grapes that spent 20 days macerating on skins, then more than two years in big barrels before bottling. It's a deep, glowing amber in the glass, rich with almost orange-syrupy aromatics; powdery and grippy on the tongue, like glorious golden farmhouse cider, and full of chewy texture – amazing with Grossi's roast duck. The price given here is what Giorgio is selling this wine for at the time of writing: normally it's closer to \$100. **\$78**, imported by giorgiodemaria.com

2018 Quealy Turbul Friulano [Mornington Peninsula]

It's tough to choose between the Quealy skin contact wines, they're all so good. The "basic" 2019 Friulano (\$30), which spends only a few hours on skins, is gorgeously bright, with ripe golden fruit and texture; the 2019 Pobblebonk (\$35), a blend of chardonnay, pinot grigio,

friulano and riesling, has a beautiful creamy flow of flavour; and the 2018 Lina Lool (\$30) friulano, malvasia, riesling, moscato giallo and chardonnay, which spends four months on skins in terracotta anfora, has exquisite perfume and layers of flavour. But the one I would have drunk even more of if I'd known I wouldn't be getting the chance again for a while is the Turbul: 100 per cent friulano, wild yeast, four months on skins, anfora, barrels, so much texture, richness, satisfaction, and oodles of "chicken stock umami". Hardly needs mentioning, but these Quealy wines all offer amazing value, given the quality. **\$30**, quealy.com.au

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