

Brand Australia Marches On

Bin there, done that – we've become so familiar with Australian Chardonnay that Virginwines.com even uses "Oaky Aussie Style Chardonnay" as a generic descriptor for big fat whites.

Our purchases of wine from "Down Under" have almost caught up with France – at least in the "drink at home" trade - with our Gallic neighbours hanging onto 22.4% of sales by value and Oz catching up fast at 19.9%. We're still much more conservative when eating or drinking out, though even here the New World is making a dent. The Aussie wine industry seems to be counting on us to continue this trend, judging by the vast areas of vineyards planted in the last few years. The area under vine was 139,861 hectares in 2000, with just over 110,000 actually producing grapes (about the same as the whole of Bordeaux). This means there are nearly 30,000 football pitches worth of young vines due to start cropping shortly. While much of this frantic planting has been the big international trio of Chardie, Cab and Shiraz, there's a growing interest in what else Oz has to offer.

Riesling – the New Black?

Riesling is the hottest new "cool" varietal in Sydney - quite a surprise for such an unloved grape. It's struggled to shake off its association with semi-sweet, Germanic-style, sugar water - never mind its burden of substandard imitators (Laski Rizling being the major guilty party).

In spite of this, the Clare Valley has taken Riesling and made a strong case for fame as a world class Riesling producer. The region was originally founded by a man named Horrocks (most famous for being fatally shot in the face by his own camel), and as elsewhere, Riesling in Clare has gone through multiple personalities. It wasn't until the 1980s that Brian Croser led the way in developing a dry late harvest wine, which is now the benchmark style across the Valley.

Grace and Flavour

So what does make Clare Riesling so special? The wines are dry, with almost ethereal aromas, a firm mineral palate with lemony freshness and a long intense finish. Mouth-watering with food when young (especially fish or anything with an Asian influence), these are wines that age superbly well. They develop gorgeous toast and honey characters with time, not the kerosene and petrol notes usually associated with European Riesling (in fact the producers get quite stropky if such terms are mentioned in their hearing).

The other great secret of success is that prices are still quite moderate for such superb wines. Even the very top names like Grosset only sell for 35 Aussie dollars on release (about £12) and most are under 20 dollars at home. Over here you should be able to find Wakefield (Oddbins £6.99), Tim Adams (£7.12 Tesco.com), and Knappstein (Oddbins £6.99). At these prices you can afford to stick a bottle or several away for a few years.

Chuck out your Corkscrews

Clare producers are particularly impressive in the way that they pull together and present a united front to the outside world. Last year, a group of leading

producers (including Wakefield) raised two fingers to the cork industry and moved to Stelvin screwcaps instead. This move has been purely for quality and to avoid the twin curses of cork taint and random oxidation. The Stelvin screwcap is specially designed for premium wine and is actually more expensive than cork (in spite of the perceived link between screwcaps and cheap plonk) and the move has been so successful that a number of Kiwi producers in Marlborough have followed suit.

The March of the Rhone Rangers

All over the wine world, there's renewed excitement about things Rhonish and Australia is well placed to make the most of this. Shiraz (or Syrah) has been at the heart of Australian viticulture for decades, but not long ago you could barely give the grapes away and they ended up in muffins and even Shiraz chocolate truffles. Today, it's the red grape that's in demand and has overtaken Chardonnay as the top grape in tonnes at the crusher. What is new about Aussie Shiraz is the attention being paid to regional differences – McLaren Vale Shiraz with its rich chocolatey luscious fruit (Tatachilla Foundation Shiraz is a classic ranging from £9.99 to £16.99 at Oddbins, Majestic and Safeway) is very different to the savoury peppery Shiraz from the Pyrenees or Victoria. Iconic wines like Henschke's Hill of Grace and Penfolds Grange now have undisputed reputations as global greats and this has definitely rubbed off in the detailed attention Shiraz is getting in the winery. The days of massive extraction and "chuck an oak tree in" for good measure are going and being replaced by a less heavy handed approach, using shorter maturation times in oak and older barrels. Top wines still get the genuine article but for mid-priced wine, the Aussies have invented the "stakvat." This is a stainless steel cube holding 900 litres of wine, which can be fitted with oak slats of the variety and level of toast selected by the winemaker.

In spite of the success of Shiraz, other Rhone varieties have made much less of an impact. Its southern Rhone partner, Grenache is starting to appear more as a varietal in the UK and D'Arenberg's Custodian Grenache (£8.99 Oddbins) is a stunner, packed with juicy swashbuckling fruit (though from an amazing scruffy winery, which seems totally un-Australian).

As for whites, Viognier is touted as the new Chardonnay, but looks unlikely to make a serious bid for the crown. It's far too tricky to grow and turn into wine successfully. Yalumba, with feisty white wine maker Louisa Rose, have perhaps put the most effort into this grape, producing some gorgeously perfumed, yet elegant wines under their Heggies and Yalumba labels. Look out too for the Limited Release Oxford Landing Viognier from the same stable (£6.99 at Safeway, Booths and Unwins). Marsanne is another Rhone white that is actually nothing new Down Under. Ch Tahbilk (£5.99 Booths, £6.99 Waitrose) in the Goulburn Valley has vines dating back to the 1920s. Its neighbour Micheltons also makes lovely nutty ripe peachy wines that take well to oak (Micheltons Marsanne £5.49 Reserve £8.99, both Oddbins).

The Chill Out Zone

The Hills are Alive

Most of the well known wine regions are actually pretty hot. Even Clare Valley in spite of its renown for Riesling can hit 40°C in the height of the summer. The ability to produce a huge diversity of wines from sticky luscious Rutherglen Muscats to crisp fizz is one of Australia's strengths, so the hunt is well and truly on for cooler regions that can offer more elegance and finesse. To cool down in

Oz you have to go south, head to the coast or go up. And Australia is the flattest continent on earth. Chilly hillsides like the Adelaide Hills are producing some seriously elegant Chardonnays and promising Pinots, though it's generally a little too cold for Cabernet. Bush fires here in 1983 turned out to have silver lining – if their orchards hadn't been destroyed, the Henschkes (one of the most famous names in winemaking) might never have planted vines here. Finally Sauvignon Blanc seems to have found its natural home in the Adelaide Hills. Look out for Shaw and Smith's wonderfully zesty version (2001 in Booths £8.99, 2000 Virginwines.com £7.99) or the mouth-watering Nepenthe Sauvignon Blanc (Oddbins, Safeway, Waitrose £8.99).

The Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula in Victoria are starting to show real promise for Pinot Noir. Yarra has been known for impressive sparklers like Moët's Domaine Chandon (formerly known as Green Point) for some time, but that Holy Grail of a serious bottle of the red stuff has had to wait for the arrival of decent still wine clones. With Pinot it really makes a difference whether you have a sparkling wine clone where colour and fruit flavour don't matter, or a low yielding Burgundian clone. It's also a tricky beast in the winery but producers like Coldstream Hills (Oddbins £10.99) and Yering Station (Virginwines.com £9.99) are consistently making some of the best Pinots to come out of Australia and while, they are not exactly cheap, think what you get from Burgundy for around a tenner.

Tasmanian Devilry

A tour of cool parts of Oz would be not be complete without a trip over the water to Tasmania. It's not just cool but downright cold for much of the year, but is proving perfect for elegant Pinot Noir (Try Pipers Brook Ninth Island at Tesco/Waitrose £7.99). "Tassie" looks set for superstar status for sparkling wines able to challenge the best in the world. Some of the most impressive are still a local secret like Hardy's Arras, but for taste of what all the fuss is about, head to Oddbins for a bottle of the beautifully structured, classy Jansz (£9.99)

Everything else under the sun

The Australian wine industry as we know it today only dates back to the 1950s with the introduction of stainless steel from dairying, but there is actually a huge legacy of ancient, gnarled and low-yielding vines capable of producing fantastic quality. Most of the country has never been attacked by Phylloxera, the nasty root-feeding bug that destroyed European viticulture at the end of the 19th century. The solution was grafting onto resistant American rootstocks, a process which unfortunately shortens the life span of the vine. 30 years old is now a respectable old age for a grafted vine in Europe. Down Under, it's common to see century-old vines and around 80-85% of Australia's vines grow on their own roots. In spite of all the shiny science and technology in the winery, vineyards are often still a jumble of history. Even Southcorp admit that they have had to get their own vines typed and cloned so they know what they are growing.

Needless to say there is considerable paranoia about the possibility of spreading Phylloxera from its strongholds in Victoria. The potential costs are huge –with grafted vines costing around 4 times the price of ungrafted, never mind the loss of all that heritage. Visiting vineyards is strictly off limits, while tankers and boots must be disinfected and transport of grapes between states is banned (even my running shoes were disinfected at the airport, though they were covered in Bordeaux mud!).

In amongst all that ancient Shiraz lurk all sorts of rarities like Dolcetto, Touriga, Ondenc, Crouchen, Pinot Meunier and even Gouais. Bill Chambers (also maker of some of the most gorgeously sticky Rutherglen Muscats, Oddbins £5.99 per half bottle) was on the point of pulling out this almost extinct white (it tastes rather like undistinguished Muscadet) until scientists discovered it is one of the parents of Chardonnay. Bill gave it a reprieve as one of the last remaining plots in the world. Verdelho too is a hanger-on from days of fortified jug wine, but made as a dry white, it is uniquely stylish. Try Capel Vale Verdelho (Sainsbury, Majestic £7.99) with its grassy, fresh fruit salad style overlaid with a twist of lime – from an estate owned by a Doctor (following in the footsteps of great medical men like Dr Rawson Penfold, Dr Henry Lindeman and Dr Hardy).

There's also a new wave of imports of trendy Italians – Sangiovese, Barbera (look for Garry Crittenden's Barbera Waitrose £7.99), Nebbiolo and even more obscure varieties like Arneis, Sagrantino and Lagrein. Many of these are baby vines, still barely out of nursery quarantine, but at least the industry is not resting on its laurels. It may be a long time before the passion for Chardonnay and Shiraz fades, but it's no use waiting till then to restring the bow.

Battle of the Brands

The big brands like Jacobs Creek, Lindemans, Nottage Hill, Rosemount and others have barely had a mention. Just about everyone must know what they taste like by now and they are on the shelf in every shop that sells wine. There's no doubt that they do a reliable job in delivering a consistent style, day in day out and have contributed to our love affair with Australian wine. Yet Australia has so much more to offer than just another Chardonnay or Shiraz, so why not push the boat out a little and explore the huge range of exciting wines from Down Under.

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