

Decanter, 2008 - Australian Wine, Absolute Quality

I feel very strongly about the absolute quality of Australian wine. Two thirds of my EuroCave is populated by Australian - I very much practice what I preach. I have been lucky enough to taste an incredible array of white and red Australian wines over the last twenty or so years. I am delighted to open bottles at my dinner parties, wine schools, lectures and the like and watch people's faces light up. This is the same expression that I see when my friends taste Château Cheval Blanc for the first time or a great Corton-Charlemagne. Wonder and amazement accompanied by something 'clicking' into place in one's hedonistic smell and taste memory. Australia does this for me as often as France does. Having said this you really have to pay for the pleasure if you are searching for really impactful French wines. Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal provide fun and serious wines in equal measure, but in my experience these truly memorable vinous highlights can be counted easily without having to resort to taking your shoes and socks off. The New World has plenty of excitement flowing through its pores but I very rarely find a wine that hasn't a counterpart in Australia that would knock it sideways. There are exceptions, of course, we all know who they are, but I find South American wines, as a mass category, relatively clumsy and often hard to get to the bottom of the bottle; Californian wines are often flash, but desperately dear and South African wines tend to be a little too unpolished, but moving, albeit slowly in the right direction. Only New Zealand is hitting the target with regular accuracy, but Australia's flavour palette is so much more diverse.

I would go so far as to say that the biggest and most important time of improvement in viticulture, winemaking, distribution and downright deliciousness that the wine world has ever witnessed has been the last decade. These have been Australia's years. Australia has been pivotal in this seismic change.

The personal integrity and extraordinary potential of Australia and its wines is staggering if you can get your head around it. There is still a long way to go in even-finer-tuning this country's incredible wines - I have stopped writing my annual wine guide in the UK in favour of publishing my own book in Australia, where the thirst for top quality wine and knowledge is unblinkered and enthusiastic in equal measure. But how and why has this country achieved so much in such a relatively short space of time? It is not quite as simple as 'Individuality' - Peter Althaus at Domaine A in Tasmania, or 'Imagination', Steve Webber, De Bortoli, Yarra Valley. These are great words, but I needed to delve deeper, so I got on the blower.

The original brief for this piece was incendiary enough - 'Argue that at £10-£20, Australia outperforms the rest of the New World and also discuss why it's time to stop being snotty about it and take Australia more seriously'. As I set about noting down my own thoughts, I decided to ask a collection of opinion makers in Australia their reactions, too. Blimey, the response was overwhelming. Jeff Grosset (Grosset, Clare

Valley) nails it in one fell swoop “The brief gets me for a start - limited in price range and region. The ‘New World’ is a favorite of mine. When I stand on the Grosset Polish Hill site explaining to a visitor the 600 million year old rock structure, I can’t help but smile about that term. It’s not as if the vineyards have been grafted on to the landscape, at least that’s not the way I think of vineyards like that one, any more than I would about the vineyards of Burgundy. The reason I feel that way is that they work, confirmed by how the wines taste from these particular sites. In the case of Australia, they belong here just as we do. And that price range...! We (Aussie producers) are at least in part responsible for this, using ‘value’ incessantly in statements about our wine. I think it’s bullshit and always has been. It degrades what my life and those of colleagues have been dedicated to - which is the making of world class wine. If Australians stop referring to value and more drinkers open their minds and just taste, Australia may soon clear that last big hurdle. I live for the day when the word Australia no longer limits people’s perception of a wine’s greatness.” Interesting that Huon Hooke, in the Sydney Morning Herald gave the 2007 Grosset Polish Hill Riesling 95/100 points, remarking that this wine is arguably Australia’s benchmark Riesling, so why does it sell for only \$42 and not \$142?

The link between wine and value for money is unavoidable, but this drum is beaten too much and too loud, often at the expense of the sheer quality of flavour summed up in the totally under-used and misunderstood term - taste. Aussies have taste in spades.

Tyson Stelzer (Brisbane-based author and wine writer) says, “We need champions in our midst to inspire us to pursue quality in spite of cost. We have them already, certainly, and I can name dozens. But perhaps they do not always speak loudly enough? France makes more low-priced dross than any other country in the world, yet this does not distract from its international reputation for making more benchmarks than anywhere else in the universe.”

This is strong stuff. I travel around Australia for three months of the year, tasting, judging, running an annual wine competition and writing an annual guide book for these passionate Aussies. I taste over five thousand wines Down Under each year and no other country compares in terms of such a high overall average of quality across the board. There is very little crap here, too, which cannot be said about any other winemaking country in the world. At the top end, I am not talking about price now, but in sheer levels of elegance, complexity, purity of message and reflection of a wine’s origins I have more pleasure drinking Australian wines than even the great wines of France.

Dan Buckle, winemaker at Mount Langi Ghiran, flips the notion over and suggests that, “The answer to the question might be innovation, technology, wine science and viticulture education, progressive thinking, lack of constraints and binding traditions. Maybe, but these are no longer our unique, great strengths. In 2007 we can hardly say these things are lacking in Argentina or the Napa Valley, or anywhere else for that matter. The real truth lies in the sense of community between Australian wine producers and, most importantly, the emphasis on the next wave of young wine folks coming through. It is their determination to make truly great top-end Australian wines

that is compelling. Wines that sit well next to any Old World producers' yet remain iconic to Australia. I see this in every region."

I challenged David Hohnen, ex-Cape Mentelle, now with McHenry Hohnen, over the fact that I thought that the Margaret River wines, while undoubtedly world class, seemed to have been treading water for a while. Was this a chink in the Aussie armour? Or, perhaps, has Margaret River already reached its peak? His perceptive reply was that a re-grouping and team-talking period was in place and, like a rolling maul on a rugby pitch, the next push towards improvement and greatness was just around the corner. These things cannot be forced. Bordeaux, as an iconic and wildly underperforming wine region across the board would, I am sure, love to have this calibre of impressive self-confidence.

Never one to mince his words, Brian Croser, winemaker at Tapanappa says that, "Australia has only one way to go - upmarket (his fine wine mantra is nothing short of evangelical) and coastal (his climate and soil knowledge equally impressive)". He, along with many others, is helping industry leaders to mentor the youth and maintain the corporate memories of days gone by when the great O'Shea Shirazes of the forties (which, by the way still look mind-bogglingly beautiful today) were made without any compromise whatsoever in pursuit of excellence. Steve Pannell, of SC Pannell Wines in McLaren Vale, thinks that we are looking forward to further waves of top class wines emerging from Australia over the next few years. "I think that with the drought hitting hard and frosts, bushfires etc reducing yields, the Australian wine industry is heading for a major directional change. The success in the past has been based around £4-£6 bracket, but with water restrictions from the Murray Darling basin, it is likely that it will limit our ability to produce wines at these prices. Should the drought continue then there may be a major paradigm shift to premium regional Australian wine."

Iain Riggs at Brokenwood in the Hunter Valley snipes that "Price points and quality are interesting bedfellows. From where we sit here at the bottom of the world, it is amazing that 'Old World' is viewed as better quality once over £10..... this is ignorance that needs to be hammered out of these folk." Michael Hill-Smith from Shaw & Smith embraces Australia's successes to date. "The £10-20 sector is Australia's preferred play pen. We relish the chance to pit our top wines against all-comers. Once you spend over a tenner on a bottle of regional Australian wine you move into exciting territory - racy Sauvignon Blanc, beautifully aromatic dry Riesling, complex old Semillon, or rich and spicy Shiraz with or without Grenache or Viognier. These wines all over-deliver." He's right of course. Around the corner at Petaluma, Peter Dredge points to some of the core reasons for such high standards in Australian winemaking, "Oenology and viticulture graduate numbers have gone through the roof, to the point where winemakers are working as cellar hands and viticulturalists are pruning all over the place. 'Educated' passion and enthusiasm echoes through many wineries with a higher quality bar set as a result. Australian winemakers are fiercely competitive. This drives quality winemaking." From one young gun to a very experienced and fascinating wine character, Jim Brayne, Chief Winemaker at McWilliam's, "Consistency and reliability of quality is paramount at every

price point and Australia certainly leads the way in this regard. This consistency is also complemented with character - varietal, regional or site - drawn from Australia's diverse viticultural areas, making for a pretty powerful combination that very few, if any, other wine producing nations can offer." I know Jim loves and drinks the European classics, as do all of the Aussies that I interviewed in this article, but they are wise enough to know that their wines will only be bought and cherished if every effort is made to ensure they are as perfect as they can possibly be.

Kirsten Moore, UK Manager of the industry body Wine Australia finds that, "There's a core of serious wine drinkers who have never explored Australian. Imagine when fine wine drinkers start learning that Australia's best wines come from vines that are much older than many in Europe. Where have they been for the past 100 years they will ask?" Imagine indeed. When I pour serious Australian wine for UK-based wine groups they are always shocked and amazed by their layers of fruit and clarity of message. You have read some of the reasons as to why the wine trade in Australia believes that they are more than worthy heavyweight contenders in the world of wine, but it is in the glass where the real proof is found.

I have listed, region by region, some of the most amazing wine producers in the world below. They all come from Australia. You should track them down and see what all of the fuss is about. You really are missing out if you don't - imagine the shoe on the other foot. You are Australian and I am trying to convince you that the top wines from France are unmissable and that many of them cost little more than £10, with the truly rare ones sometimes inching over the £30-mark. You would be foolish not to listen. Of course these French wines are sensational. However, I struggle to think of that many that are under £30 though.

I will sign off with a brilliant quote from David Gleave at Liberty Wines in the UK. Please remember that this guy is an Italian specialist and his wine list is one of the most complete on the planet. "Regional Australia is as exciting as it gets. The wines are made mostly in small, boutique wineries and the majority of the winemakers are as fastidious and quirky as their counterparts in France or Italy. This side of the Australian wine scene is often masked by the mass of mid-priced brands that dominate the UK shelves, but anyone who wants to get a taste of the real Australia should search out these wines!

I truly hope you do - life's too short, as they say.

A very serious list of Australian Estates of excellence - this list could be twice as long, but I have been brutal!

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Cape Mentelle, Cullen, Ferngrove, Frankland Estate, Leeuwin Estate, Moss Wood, Pierro.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Clare Valley - Grosset, Jim Barry, O'Leary Walker, Pikes, Tim Adams, Wendouree.

Barossa & Eden Valleys - Fox Gordon, Glaetzer, Henschke Leo Buring, Penfolds, Peter Lehmann, St Hallett, Teusner, Yalumba.

Adelaide Hills - Ashton Hills, The Lane, Petaluma, Shaw & Smith.

McLaren Vale - Kay Brothers Amery, Mitolo, Ulithorne, Wirra Wirra.

Coonawarra & Wrattontully - Balnaves, Katnook, Majella, Parker, Penley, Tapanappa.

VICTORIA

Bannockburn, Bass Phillip, De Bortoli (Yarra Valley), Campbells, Chambers Rosewood, Dalwhinnie, Gembrook Hill, Giaconda, Kooyong, Mount Langi Ghiran, Mount Mary, Paringa Estate, PHI, Savaterre, Stonier, Yering Station.

TASMANIA

Domaine A.

NEW SOUTH WALES

Brokenwood, Clonakilla, Keith Tulloch, McWilliam's/ Mount Pleasant, Tyrrell's.

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