

Australia: introduction

9 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Export- driven industry making waves and fruit- driven wines, all over the world.

Main grapes: Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon (red); Chardonnay, Semillon, Riesling (white).

For some years Australians have been at the cutting edge of the New World of wine as the country has dramatically increased the extent to which it exports both its wines and its winemakers. After a decade of dazzling export growth, even glut, especially in the good- value, large- volume sector of the market, Australian growers are under increasing pressure from limited water supplies (it's irrigation that has enabled them to produce such large and consistent crops in hot inland regions) and the industry is at pains to show the world that it can also excel in regionally specific mid- range and fine wines using a broader palette of grape varieties.

The wine industry is not fundamentally distinguished by history (Australia was one of the vine's later conquests), and certainly not by geography (Australian wine producers are congenital truckers of grapes and blenders of wines), but by its philosophy. Can do, perhaps best sums up the Australian attitude to wine production.

The wine regions of Australia constitute different departments in one huge wine factory, any one of which may be called upon to deliver a spare part as and when required. Part of the explanation for this lies in the division between winemaking and grape growing as commercial activities - a division even more marked than in California. Typical Australian wine producers buy in most of their grapes and, thanks to the refrigerated transport systems needed in a country as big and as hot as this, may well buy them from several hundred, or even thousand, miles away.

This pragmatism continues through the business of grape processing, as an Australian would call what the French might call *vinification*. If the winery hasn't enough fermentation tanks, the fruit or juice will simply be stored at low temperatures until there is enough space for the winemaker's carefully controlled fermentation. If the typical French winemaker sees Nature as the driving force and the typical American sees it as a demon to be tamed, their Australian counterparts see themselves as simple processors of farm output. The Australian Wine Research Institute is one of the most admired centres of wine academe in the world and the graduates who use the results of its intensely industry- linked work are taught a healthy respect for science, technology and for what man can achieve when given a free hand.

Australians revel in their lack of the sort of restrictions which dictate what a traditional European vine grower must grow and how he or she must do so. They can establish a vineyard anywhere they like (although the availability of water is usually an important determining factor) and indeed the current distribution of vineyards old and new suggests there are undiscovered pockets of suitable vineyard land all over the southern quarter of this vast country.

A few higher tracts of Queensland such as the Granite Belt notwithstanding, viticulture is a southern Australian phenomenon. Most of Australia's vines grow where summers are cool enough to allow some favour to build up in the grapes before they are so embarrassingly high in sugar that they must be picked lest acids plummet to uncorrectable levels. (Most Australian wines will have some [acidification](#).)

More than 40 per cent of all vines grow in the state of [South Australia](#), a quarter in the state of [Victoria](#) and most of the rest in [New South Wales](#) - although a disproportionate number of the country's finest wines are grown in the south western corner of [Western Australia](#). Australian wine is conventionally divided by these state boundaries (across which strict quarantines may apply such as those designed to keep the phylloxera louse crossing from Victoria into South Australia) but there is a more fundamental divide than this.

A high proportion of Australia's vines are farmed, intensively, on the green oases of the heavily irrigated vineyards of the parched, dusty interior. These districts - Riverland, Murray Darling and Riverina - straddle the boundaries between the three most important wine- producing states. Here Sultana and Muscat Gordo Blanco (the less fine Muscat, of Alexandria, known sometimes as Lexia here) are cultivated in profusion and have been used alternately by the wine and dried fruit industries according to the vagaries of supply and demand. These less distinguished grapes can make useful bulk filler for the wine boxes, or 'casks' as they are known, that have made up the bottom end of the Australian wine market since the 1970s, but considerable acreages of the irrigated areas are also devoted to so- called premium varieties, Chardonnay, Cabernet and Shiraz particularly but by no means exclusively. Australians are adept at transforming this fairly humdrum raw material into a palatable and completely dependable drink, often with the help of oak chips.

But the reputation of Australian wine depends on much more exciting fruit produced in one of the country's more distinguished wine regions (even if that fruit is still often blended between regions so that its provenance can often be difficult to determine from the wine label). Britons, who fell deeply in love with Australian wine in the 1990s, became used to seeing on labels the catch- all appellation 'South Eastern Australia' (which conveniently encompasses all wine regions except the relatively limited ones of Western Australia, including the irrigated areas).

These regions are examined in detail separately, but the importance of trucking should not be underestimated. The typical large winery is probably based in South Australia, often in the Barossa, but will buy in grapes from as far afield as Coonawarra, the irrigated interior and possibly even the Hunter Valley in New South Wales. (Conversely, it has been a source of persistent irritation to South Australians that they have long provided so much fruit to bolster the reputations of wineries based in New South Wales.) At the time of writing, the Australian wine industry is dominated by five companies - Hardys (part of the global giant Constellation), Foster's (Lindemans, Wolf Blass, Penfolds, Rosemount, Wynns), McGuigan Simeon, Pernod Ricard (Jacob's Creek, Wyndham) and Casella (Yellow Tail). Together they account for almost two- thirds of the total Australian wine production and three- quarters of exports.

Australians are not short of energy or sunshine but they are short of water and, in most wine regions, labour. California can at least rely on a substantial Mexican workforce, but the Australian wine industry is thoroughly mechanised, and hand- picking is now relatively rare. Many vineyards are deliberately picked by machine at night in the relentless battle against heat in most areas at harvest time. The campaign tends to continue with deliberate chilling of grapes and must. (Water consumption can be as high in the cellar as in the vineyard.) Oxygen is seen as the other great enemy and [protective winemaking](#) has been the norm.

Australians have been avid users of American oak, for ageing whites as well as reds, and the wines' flavours can be so full and exuberant that they stand up well even to less- than- perfectly seasoned wood. The use of French oak has increased considerably in recent years, however, particularly for the more ambitious reds, and Chardonnays are much more refined than they were in the 1990s. (Though chips and staves are still common, cheaper alternatives.)

The aim of most Australian winemakers so far has been to exhibit the flavour of the fruit from which the wine was made rather than the characteristics of the place (usually places) where it was grown. Hence the phrase 'fruit- driven' for such wines.

One final particularly Australian phenomenon is the wine show, effectively an agricultural exhibition held annually in the state capitals and more locally in which panels of carefully chosen, extremely professional judges award medals and trophies to wines entered from all over the country. It is all taken extremely seriously.

See [Wine Australia](#) for more information on this region.