

## Whites, reds and Orange

31 Dec 2001 by JR

For people in the world of wine, Orange from now on will mean not a telecoms company with a high-profile prize for a female fiction-writer but an intriguing new source of relatively sophisticated Australian wine.

New South Wales, in the far south-east of the world's most dynamic wine-exporting country, has been sprouting new wine regions at an almost indecent rate recently. There is Hilltops, also known as Young. There is the unforgettably named Tumbarumba. There is Shoalhaven, with its echoes of Popeye. And there is Orange, home to two of the most decisively different wine operations I have ever visited on the same day.

The first vines were planted on the gentle slopes of Mount Canobolas, the extinct volcano that dominates this relatively cool region 150 miles west of Sydney, in 1983. They were planted by an extraordinary couple, Stephen and Rhonda Doyle - he an ex-media-librarian with a flair for words, she once in charge of the social security office in a part of Sydney he describes as 'an antipodean approximation of Brixton and Soho on speed'.

They used to make wine in Sydney from bought-in grapes but saw the potential of Orange from their regular drives through it. For the first few years they commuted between Sydney and Orange and, when working on the smallholding they called Bloodwood, slept in the back of their Landcruiser. There is a clearing in a glade overlooking the vines to this day.

In 1992, a Bloodwood wine won best Cabernet in the Hunter Valley wine show. This was remarkable - not least because hardly anyone there had even heard of Orange. The Doyles were by then living in relative luxury, in one-half of the shed in which the wines were made. Rhonda moved up to this underpopulated region from the fleshpots of Sydney without the slightest experience of country life. Devotion indeed - fuelled by her unusually strong interest in flavour, food and cooking, which has underpinned the enterprise.

By the late 1990s Bloodwood's eight hectares (20 acres) of hand-reared vines were sufficiently well established for the Doyles to build themselves a house - or at least a kitchen and diningroom with a bedroom or two attached.

Compare and contrast this picture of rugged pioneers owing not a cent to the bank, with Cabonne, Orange's newest wine producer and biggest by far. More than A\$45m has been raised via the popular Australian route of investors seeking tax breaks. Cabonne describes itself as 'a multi-branded wine company based in Australia's sunniest cool climate wine region'.

The company's 900 hectares of vineyards, all under six years old, make it Australia's ninth biggest vine-grower. Its literature boasts a winery with a 10,000-tonne capacity, although Cabonne apparently managed to process 20,000 tonnes this year (quite a bit of it for big producers outside the region) and has announced its aim to take in double that amount next year, which would make its unglamorous winery four times as big as Rosemount's headquarters in the Upper Hunter.

Cabonne has some ambitious targets to meet for its shareholders.

Which is presumably why it has hired Chris Anstee, one of the wine world's most affable executives, to sell its wines and Jon Reynolds, a talented refugee from the Hunter Valley with his own Orange label, to make them.

Cabonne's arrival in Orange is a bit like Gap locating its principal production plant in Shetland. The dozen or so small wineries in Orange hardly know what has hit them.

Cabonne meanwhile is doing its best to make the wine consumers of the world aware of Orange, although as Anstee admits, the name can be a tough sell in the US where people confuse it with California's Orange County.

The Orange region itself, however, is promising for grapes - even if, confusingly, it has up to now been known principally for growing apples. (There is a strong correlation between suitable growing conditions for apples and grapes.) It is cool enough to see snow each winter, has no shortage of irrigation water and sometimes autumn rain (though irrigation is often needed in summer), and has warm but not baking hot summers with refreshingly cool nights because of the altitude.

Altitude is a burning issue here. Bloodwood was planted at between 800 and 900 metres above sea level and has managed to produce some fine Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet and Merlot - as well as a sturdy rose called Big Men in Tights.

An estate converted by Pam and Don Hoskins from orchards to vineyards in 1994, called Brangayne, is at 870 to 970 metres and makes one of Orange's most convincing reds - The Tristan.

Brangayne's 1999 Pinot Noir also hints that this finicky vine could be very much at home in the refreshing air of Orange, but today such considerations as suitability tend to take a back seat. When I asked the team at Cabonne why so little Pinot Noir was planted in Orange, I was told, 'the growers asked the label owners what they wanted and they all said Cabernet and Chardonnay'.

Cabonne's own plantings are centred on the giant (500 hectare) Little Boomey vineyard, just north of the small town of Orange, which is so low it straddles the 600-metre contour line that defines the outer limit of the Orange appellation. This means that some of the Little Boomey wines, its cheapest brand dubbed 'The Bold Australian - Vibrant, Contemporary, Premium price positioning', may have to be labelled Central Ranges rather than Orange.

The 2000 Little Boomey range seems excellent value to me, with whites at £4.99 and reds at £5.99 in the UK. The 2000s were made by French winemaker Nathalie Estribeau on secondment from Cabonne's UK importers D & D, and finished by Jon Reynolds and his colleague Nic Millichip.

As with practically all Orange wines I have tasted, they are attractively aromatic, have a frank, open brightness of fruit and sufficient natural balance (not too much alcohol, acid or tannin) to make them good wines with food, not just good at winning competitions. The Sauvignon Blanc impressed me more than the slightly heavily oaked Chardonnay and the Cabernet Merlot blend seems the most confident of the four reds (Cabernet, Merlot and Shiraz, too).

Marks and Spencer will be selling slightly fruitier, less oaked versions of Little Boomey wines under the Weandre Stream label. At higher prices, from higher vineyards, Cabonne is marketing wines with Jon Reynolds' name on them, to be sold in the US by Trincherio, the outfit behind Sutter Home White Zinfandel. Should any Cabonne wine enjoy even a fraction of the success of this extraordinary California phenomenon, those shareholders would presumably be thrilled.

### Orange wines to try:

**Weandre Stream Chardonnay 2000 £4.99, Marks and Spencer from August**

**Little Boomey Cabernet Merlot 2000 £5.99, Co-op from August**

**Bloodwood Riesling 1997 £9.30, Melrose Drover of Edinburgh on +44 (0)7762 545583**

**Brangayne The Tristan 1999 £9.99, [Bonhote Foster](http://www.pinotpeople.com) of Haverhill +44 (0)1440 730779 ([www.pinotpeople.com](http://www.pinotpeople.com))**

**Canobolas Smith Chardonnay 1996 Est B £15.10, Melrose Drover +44 (0)7762 545583**

**Rosemount Orange Vineyard Shiraz 1997 £17.99 [ChateauOnline.com](http://ChateauOnline.com) and [Virginwines.com](http://Virginwines.com)**

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