

The best Australian wines tasted on my travels

5 Oct 2001 by JR

ORANGE, NEW SOUTH WALES_

This small, new, high wine region is 150 miles west of Sydney and a strange mix of small-scale artisans and one vast investment group Cabonne. See [Whites, reds and Orange](#) for some background information.

Recommended wines from Orange:

Bloodwood Riesling 1997 £9.30 Melrose Drover of Edinburgh (tel 07762 545583)

Off-dry, tangy, limey with loads of personality. I tasted the 1992 version of this in 2001 and it was still extremely lively, toasty, even bordering on austere, and certainly a wine for food. The Doyles let the vintage dictate the style of Riesling (as in Germany's best estates indeed). The 1996 was more mineral with lots of round fruit on the palate while the 1999 (currently on release in Australia for 14 dollars) is more floral and gentle.

Bloodwood Maurice 1998 (about 22 dollars in Australia)

One of the most obviously Merlot Merlots I have tasted in Australia. This has the bloody meat overtones of a savoury Pomerol with a neat end to some lively fruit. Needs another two or three years in bottle.

Brangayne The Tristan 1999 £9.99 [Bonhote Foster](#) of Haverhill (tel 01440 730 779, web www.pinopeople.com)

Deep crimson, lively, intense, very bright fruit. Well balanced. A good recipe. The 1997 of this Cabernet/ Merlot/ Shiraz blend won a gold medal in the Adelaide show and is also marked by particularly bright fruit with real succulence.

Brangayne Pinot Noir 1999

Much finer flavours than the 1998. Real Pinot Noir character. Surprisingly gentle, flattering texture for a machine-picked wine. A promising combo of grape and place.

Cabonne - Weandre Stream Chardonnay 2000 £4.99 Marks & Spencer

Fruity but subtle. Definitely for food. More restraint than most Australian Chardonnays at this price.

Cabonne - Little Boomey Cabernet Merlot 2000 £5.99 Co-op

Very fresh fruit. Open, aromatic, tastes of fruit rather than winemaking. Good value. This vintage had superior barrel treatment to the price tag; subsequent ones may not be treated to such luxury. John Reynolds arrived four months after the 2000 vintage.

Canobolas Smith Chardonnay 1996 Est B £15.10 Melrose Drover (tel 07762 545583)

Slightly sweet but delicate, lively and with a very fine texture. There's quite a citrus fruit undertone from this, the 1995 Boutique Winery of the Year.

Rosemount Orange Vineyard Shiraz 1997 £17.99 [ChateauOnline.com](#) and [Virginwines.com](#)

Very very thick and deep colour but the fruit is fresh and lively. Bursting with life in fact and ready to gulp. Bit too expensive at £17.99 though. _

CANBERRA DISTRICT

This very cool district is much older than one might think. Pioneers Clonakilla chose and planted their first block, at an altitude of about 500m, in 1971. Some of the highest vineyards, up to 860m, have real trouble ripening and a good third of the district is regularly frosted. Many producers buy in some grapes from outside the region which muddies the picture, though this practice is declining as more and more fruit comes on stream. The district is defined not by physical features; it's a circle within 50 miles of Canberra post office (though the Post Office has since been moved and the boundary drawn in a rather more scientific way). BRL Hardy had such success with an Eileen Hardy Chardonnay based substantially on Canberra fruit that they built Kamberra (*sic*), a winery and tourist centre there - the only one in fact actually in ACT itself as opposed to the New South Wales hills around the capital. Presumably they were lured by substantial grants to live up this eerie cross between Washington DC and a ghost town. Prices are low because the population is. Local stars whose wines I did not have the chance to taste include Madew's Riesling, Brindabella Hills Chardonnay and Jeir Creek's output. Prices tend to be suppressed by the relative isolation of the area. Quantities are also small and exporting to the US has been fraught with difficulties, for Lark Hill anyway.

Recommended wines from Canberra district:

Clonakilla Shiraz/ Viognier 1998

This homage to traditional Côte Rôtie does show the point of the blend. The wine is wonderfully sumptuous, the breadth of coolish climate Shiraz given extra fragrance by five per cent Viognier. The 1994 vintage was much tougher while the 1992 is now a lovely old red wine rather than an Australian Shiraz.

The 2000 was extremely promising from barrel in January 2001. Liberty Wines of London on order@libertywine.co.uk are offering it at £22.95 a bottle - an interesting buy for any North Rhône fan.

Other UK retail stockists (at £22.95 - £24.95 per bottle) are: [Ballantynes](#) of Cowbridge, Wales; [Bennetts](#) of Chipping Camden, Gloucestershire; Harbour Wines, Maidstone, Kent; The Sommelier Wine Company, St Peter Port, Guernsey and Noel Young Wines, Trumpington, Cambridgeshire.

Clonakilla Viognier 2000

This was looking very good out of barrel in January 2001 but has clearly sold out for Liberty are already offering the 2001, for delivery in 2002, at £19.95 a bottle!

Lark Hill Chardonnay 1998 imported by New World Wines, London

It takes a lot to enthuse me about Australian Chardonnay but I loved this one's nerve, creamy texture, well judged malolactic portion (one-third) and length. A lemon posset of a wine. The 1999 was sold out when I visited but New World Wines of London SW11 (www.NewWorldWines.co.uk) list it at £11.99.

Lark Hill Exultation Cabernet 1998

Very ripe cool climate Cabernet treated to 18 months in new oak. Gentle, round and supple. This is much riper and more luscious than the Cabernet- Merlot 98 imported by New World Wines into the UK.

Lark Hill Pinot Noir 1999 and 2000

The most exciting variety from this extremely cool, high, windblown, low-vigour vineyard. (Most Canberra vineyards would be too warm.) The '99 in particular had a lovely fragrance, some spice and a flatteringly gentle texture. The 2000 has taken on flesh since I tasted it in January 2001 and danced on the palate most agreeably. The 2000, which won a silver medal at this year's International Wine Challenge in London, is £14.99 at New World Wines (see above for details). This is a very fair price.

BEECHWORTH, VICTORIA

There are clusters of vinous excellence, and real local characteristics, all over the state of Victoria. I could have visited Heathcote, Grampians/ Great Western, Macedon Ranges/ Kyneton, King Valley, Mornington Peninsula, Gippsland...

But I was drawn to the town of [Beechworth](#) - home to three of the world's more remarkable wine producers.

Recommended wines from Beechworth:

Sorrenberg Sauvignon Blanc/ Semillon 2000

The 1997 of this was still going extremely strong in 2001 which promises well for the lively, full-bodied, characterful 2000. See my [wines of the week for March 25, 2001](#). Ballantynes of Cowbridge in Wales (richard@ballantynes.co.uk) currently list the 1999, which I have not unfortunately tasted, at £64 plus VAT for six bottles.

Sorrenberg Chardonnay 2000

This long, textured wine is much more complicated than most Australian Chardonnays and on the evidence of the 1989 drunk at the lunch referred to in my account of Beechworth in 2001, there is no hurry to drink it. In fact the 1989, while clearly in decline, was holding up a lot better than most 1989 white burgundies. Ballantynes list it at £92 plus VAT for six.

Sorrenberg Shiraz 1999

This is made from fruit bought in from the Havelock Hill vineyard and I was most impressed by the appetising, well- balanced way it split the difference between Rhône and Australian styles. Young vines and low yields. Ballantynes are offering the 1998 for £73 plus VAT per six.

Giaconda Chardonnay

You should try it if you can possibly find it. It rivals Leeuwin Estate of Margaret River WA for one of Australia's finest Chardonnays, and the 1990 was in fine fettle at 11 years old - a little more mineral than the Sorrenberg 1989. Best to drink it younger than this, though. The 1995 was looking in its prime. I had the pleasure of tasting the many different ingredients in the 2000 from barrel. You can visit www.giaconda.com.au to bid for this wine on release (fax no is +61 3 5727 0246).

Giaconda Nantua Les Deux 2000

This brand new wine is a blend of 85 per cent Chardonnay which provides extraordinary richness and Kinzbrunner's trademark satiny texture and 15 per cent relatively young- vine Roussanne which adds a quite lovely lime blossom perfume. Morris & Verdin of London SE1 (sales@m-v.co.uk) list it at around £117.45 plus VAT for six bottles or £23 apiece.

Giaconda Aeolia 2000

I tasted this all- Roussanne wine from barrel and was most impressed. It is denser than Nantua, which absorbs the less brilliant barrels of Kinzbrunner's Roussanne, and is probably the finest Roussanne I have ever tasted. That said, I suspect it will cost a fortune and a half. _

VICTORIAN PROMISE ELSEWHERE (other than Beechworth)

The state of Victoria is Australia's single most exciting in terms of wine potential. Before phylloxera laid waste the vineyards that had been planted to supply Victoria's 19th century gold rush, this and not South Australia was the country's wine state. Today the vine is being planted again in pockets all over the state and in excitingly varied conditions. In fact the energetic young winemaker Scott Ireland of Provenance (who is also doing a great job for the inexpensive Jindalee label sourced in the Riverland, sorry 'Murray Darling') told me that nowadays he reckoned you could hardly ever be more than 10 miles from a winery in Victoria - an exaggeration perhaps but you get the picture.

These conditions vary enormously, from the high inland regions of the Victorian Alps in the east and the Grampians in the west, through the Shiraz hot spot of Heathcote, via the famous Yarra Valley just north of Melbourne (arguably the best restaurant city in the world) to the cooler coast with all sorts of different conditions: the wilds of Gippsland in the east which yields Bass Phillips' exceptionally Burgundian Pinot Noirs, the civilised, almost suburban Mornington Peninsula to the south of the city, to Geelong and points west.

All in all this bit of Australia has established quite a reputation for Pinot, superior (for Australia) examples having emerged first from Bannockburn in Geelong and subsequently from Scotchman's Hill from the Ballarine Peninsula further west as well as a raft of varied, relatively soft examples from the Yarra Valley. Yarra is much wetter than Geelong, whose shallow, infertile soils, along with the coastal winds, keep vine vigour and yields naturally low.

In fact in some years such as 2001 the summers are too dry for Pinot Noir and producers such as Garry Farr (ex of Bannockburn and now cheekily producing wine under his own label Bannockburn by Farr from an enclave within his ex- employer's estate) believe their Shiraz will be better. Some years however, this area is just too cool to get Shiraz fully ripe. As for Cabernet, the ebullient Garry Farr is the type who believes 'life's too short to drink Cabernet'. While Kinzbrunner of Giaconda is moving into an affair with Roussanne, Farr is doing the same with another white Rhône grape, Viognier. He expects to produce Pinot Noir with the substance to cope with Geelong's naturally high tannins once his superior clones have set down roots.

Between Bannockburn and the city is the exceptional new Shadowfax winery, built in eye- catching modern style (it looks more like a Soho restaurant than a winery) in the grounds of the ambitious Werribee Park hotel and resort complex. Matt Harrop is the talented and cautious young winemaker here and seems so far to be spending wisely the money that is undoubtedly available. For the moment he is buying in fruit from far and wide as is the Australian way while local vineyards come on stream. See below for some of the most successful bottlings so far, but this is a name to watch.

Bannockburn by Farr Pinot Noir Serré 2000

This will not be released for ages but looked extremely promising out of barrel at a year old. Very intense with lovely pure fruit underneath what was still a pretty firm overlay of oaky tannins.

Bannockburn by Farr Shiraz/ Viognier 2000

The Shiraz was fermented together with 10 per cent Viognier to produce this particularly sappy, lively wine.

Tanners of Shrewsbury (www.tanners-wines.co.uk) are stockists of Bannockburn by Farr in the UK.

Craiglee Shiraz

Pat Carmody has taken Shiraz seriously for almost longer than any other Australian producer and has been rewarded by a string of distinctive, savoury, almost elegant vintages in a style quite unlike the hefty monsters of South Australia. He has just agreed to export some wine to Morris & Verdin of London SE1, although see [WineSearcher](#) for others who will sell it.

Mount Langi Ghiran Shiraz

Another favourite Shiraz producer, on relatively high ground, although the original label is much better than the diffusion line from bought in fruit. A vertical tasting of this wine managed to impress an impressive and not- easily- impressionable line- up of Parisian tasters recently. Trevor Mast also makes fine Riesling - but then you'd expect me to say that.

Provenance Pinot Noir 2000

A much crisper, more attractively structured wine than the 1999 although both wines, based on Geelong fruit, showed very attractively pure Pinot flavours.

Shadowfax Chardonnay 2000

This deliciously exuberant blend of Geelong fruit with some from the north end of Yarra Valley is unlikely to make old bones but is well worth seeking out for drinking in its first two years of life. This full- bodied wine shows very fine oak handling and just a hint of smoky, Burgundian toast. £11.50 from Morris & Verdin of London SE1.

Other favourite wines:

Bass Phillip Premium Pinot Noir
Coldstream Hills Reserve Pinot Noir
Domaine Chandon Brut
Jasper Hill Emily's Paddock Shiraz
Morris Rare Muscat (dark, sticky, dental nightmares labelled Liqueur Muscat and Liqueur Tokay are some of Australia's greatest treasures)
Mount Langi Ghiran Shiraz
Mount Mary Quintet Cabernets
Pizzini Sangiovese and Nebbiolo
Yarra Yering No 1

There's more to come, folks!

Orange	Canberra	Beechworth	Victoria
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