

Geoff Merrill honour saved

24 May 2002 by JR

McLaren Vale cricket fan and some time winemaker Geoff Merrill came to London just before the Wine Trade Fair to show off the 1996, best vintage yet, of his top Shiraz, named after his grandfather Henley who died at the age of 102. Being an unreformed sportsman, and the sort of idiot who, like me, agrees to bite off far more than they can sometimes chew, he decided to introduce it with a series of blind tastings around the world, comparing it with many of Australia's most famous Shirazes plus two classics from the Northern Rhône, home of the Syrah/ Shiraz grape.

This was a brave move. Apparently when he conducted similar exercises in New York, San Francisco and Melbourne, the results were decidedly mixed. Things went well for the mega- moustached one (trimmed a little nowadays, like his tummy) in San Francisco where his Henley 1996 'came first by a mile'. In New York it came second, and at a gathering of 37 of Brown Forman's winemakers from around the world in Australia, it came 'third by one point'. At a tasting attended solely by his countrymen in Melbourne, however, his wine came definitively last. Maybe it was a duff bottle, he says.

ANYway, it was great fun to taste all these 'greats' blind - not least because I didn't have my invitation with me and couldn't remember for the life of me what might be included in the tasting, nor even the provenance of the other wines. (When trying to assess quality, it is a huge help not to be trying to identify the wines.) Other tasters included Australian wine writer back on leave Max Allen, Andrew Catchpole of the *Daily Telegraph*, author Nicholas Faith, Malcolm Gluck of *The Guardian*, Matthew Jukes of the *Daily Mail*, Kathryn McWhirter, Jill Norman, Rhône- ish wine expert Remington Norman, Glenfiddich Wine Writer of the Year John Stimfig and Serena Sutcliffe of Sotheby's.

The group and my rankings follow.

In the group score, wines got 1 point for first place and 8 for eighth.

As far as I was concerned there were four delicious, natural- tasting, well- balanced wines, three rather conflicted out- of- balance jobs and a disappointingly lean Hermitage la Chapelle 1996. My [detailed tasting notes](#) are on purple pages.

	Group points	My points/20
Henschke Hill of Grace	56	18.5
Guigal La Landonne	65	18
Merrill Henley	68	18
Rosemount Balmoral	69	16.5
Penfolds Grange	71	16.5
Eileen Hardy	78	18
Hermitage La Chapelle	98	14
Tahbilk 1860	101	16