

Australia slows down - for whom?

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Australian wine may be making serious inroads in the US but last week's annual two-day Australian wine tasting in London was eerily quiet according to several participants (though I am assured by those who count heads that the attendance was higher in 2004 than in 2003). There is every sign that the Australian wine export juggernaut which has overtaken France in Britain is finally running out of steam. All of which inspires other New World wine exporters to Britain with hope. Could they pick up some of the growth that Australia seems to be ceding?

American (for which read California) wine is doing best of all New World contenders, having overtaken Italy as third most important supplier of wine to UK retailers according to AC Nielsen, and the weakness of the dollar will presumably only accelerate its ascendancy - which owes much, but by no means all, to Gallo. Blossom Hill's sponsorship of the sort of tv programmes my 12 year-old daughter likes best has done this brand no harm.

South Africa has also been doing well and is now Britain's fifth most important wine supplier, having overtaken Spain which, however exciting some of her wines, just can't ratchet up the volumes of old. Chile comes seventh and sends more than three times as much wine to the UK than the next most important New World wine producers Argentina then New Zealand.

There was a time when the Australia Day(s) Tasting was the most exciting event in the London wine trade calendar. But everyone I talked to who was there this year (I was distracted by, thankfully successful, surgery on Nick's back) agrees that now that Australia is number one, its big event feels as dull as French events did when France was top dog.