

South Australia's unknown second wine region

9 Apr 2005 by JR

Hugh Johnson's classic *Pocket Wine Book* does not even have an entry for Langhorne Creek. The name hardly has the resonance of Barossa or Coonawarra but, thanks to a recent vine planting bonanza, it is now the second most important wine region in Australia's wine state, South Australia, after the Riverland's sprawl of irrigated inland vineyards.

Like almost all Australian wine regions, Langhorne Creek is certainly irrigated but it is hardly inland. Just east of the much more famous McLaren Vale, it is less than an hour's drive south east of Adelaide on Lake Alexandrina, the end of the mighty Murray River on which the South Australian wine industry depends. This is flatland traditionally watered by the rivers Angas and Bremer which carry all the rain from the Adelaide Hills, which are three times wetter than Langhorne Creek. Criss- crossed by ditches, the landscape is so flat that it looks like the Camargue with gum trees. "A hill is something you can't see a car behind", say the locals. There is one small settlement, called Langhorne Creek, and one pub which offers the culturally perplexing "Thursday night – schnitzel or curry".

Being so close to the sea, the region is cooled by The Lake Doctor, a reliable afternoon breeze off the lake which wafts in the merest suggestion of the Antarctic, lowers night temperatures and results in what in Australia qualifies as a relatively cool climate. Grapes ripen a good two weeks later than in McLaren Vale on the other side of the Mount Lofty Ranges. But thanks to reasonably regular floodwater and the fertile alluvial silt it deposits, yields in Langhorne Creek are on average five tonnes an acre - much higher than, say, Barossa Valley's - which means that the wines are relatively soft and gentle. The best wines combine the extended growing season facilitated by The Lake Doctor, with the lower yields naturally associated with older vines.

Famously ambitious South Australian winemaker Wolf Blass was one of the first in the modern era to sing the praises of Langhorne Creek fruit and always included it in the blend for his immensely successful Grey Label bottlings. The tiny, cult Noon winery in McLaren Vale, whose wines can command \$100 a bottle, has long depended on Cabernet and Shiraz grown by the Borrett family who have farmed in Langhorne Creek for 150 years.

But it has been only in recent years when water licences were made available that major investments have been made here. In the early 1990s there were perhaps 500 hectares (1,250 acres) of vines. Today there are nearly 6,000 hectares, with major plantings by all four Australian wine giants Beringer Blass, Hardys, Southcorp and Orlando, which has built a special winery designed to transform Langhorne Creek grapes into suitable raw material for its Jacobs Creek Reserve blends.

This brash commercialism is a world away from the oldest winery in Langhorne Creek, Bleasdale, built by British adventurer Frank Potts who at 14 was a deckhand on HMS Victory. His great, great grandsons still run the outfit today, in a National Trust red gum winery that, with its shafts of light on to ancient vats and dusty wooden floors, reminded me of nothing more than a port lodge in Oporto or sherry bodega in Jerez. In fact the Potts family specialised in fortified wines for many a long year and still make a rather delicious 16 year- old Verdelho in the style of Madeira which sells at the cellar door for just Aus \$32 (about £13 or \$25). But their main output today, from some remarkably old vineyards originally planted by old Frank on the banks of the Bremer, are fine, accessible, underpriced reds made by no- nonsense Renae Hirsch, a runner- up in the Qantas Young Winemaker of the Year awards.

Another set of fifth generation Langhorne Creek brothers, Tom and Guy Adams, are responsible for the region's first modern boutique winery, Brothers in Arms, custom- built at vast expense in 2001 on the family vineyard, one of Australia's most famous. Metala's ancient vine trunks, some a foot across, have been supplying great, increasingly concentrated fruit, first to Stonyfell and then to Beringer Blass's Saltram, for the famous Metala label since the late 19th century. The Adams brothers have been planting and planning, going to Israel to refine their drip irrigation techniques. "We felt they had the most experience with irrigation – they've been mucking about with water for 700 years," is how they explain this particular research trip.

The Brothers in Arms wines prove that Langhorne Creek can make fine wines on its own account and not just useful blending material. Imported into the US with notable success by California- based specialist importer Dan Phillips, these wines are built for the long- term and impressive - as is the employee ratio: 1.5 people make up to 20,000 cases of wine each year. The one whole person is the talented young winemaker David Freschi who designed the winery and has his own promising label Casa Freschi. In this temperature- controlled tin shed is effectively a toybox for any aspiring young winemaker, including the most complicated lift and hoist system to obviate the need for pumping wine - and a great deal of space, presumably in anticipation of the time when the Adams' contractual obligations to sell fruit to the big companies expire. (That expensive lift, by the way, would not be necessary in a region which had a decent slope into which a winery could be built.)

If Brothers in Arms and Casa Freschi are Langhorne Creek's cake, bread and butter operations are also sprouting here – most notably that which sells its wines under the names Step Road and Beresford, and Angas Vineyards which, on a little over 200 hectares, grows all manner of exotic grape varieties for labels such as Ben Glaetzer's Heartland, and Zonte's Footstep which has enjoyed immediate commercial success in the UK and absorbs about a third of the entire vineyard's production.

Until now well under 20 per cent of the wine made from Langhorne Creek grapes is sold under that name. My guess is that we will see it much more often on wine labels - or possibly, since it is so much prettier, the name of the official wine zone that encompasses it, Fleurieu, instead.

Some favourite Langhorne Creek wines

Note these wines are listed in descending order of price.

Noon Reserve Shiraz 2001

Tobacco, leather, bonfire notes on remarkably supple tannins. Hides its 15.8 per cent well.

The **2003** is £24-25 Great Grog of Edinburgh and Uncorked of London EC2

Casa Freschi Profundo 2002

Tiny quantities of a highly distinctive, savoury Cabernet, Shiraz, Malbec blend. Big but not brassy.

Imported by Angels' Share, New York

Brothers in Arms Shiraz 2001

Excellent value – mulberries and French oak – for cellaring.

£15.30 Tanners of Shrewsbury

Bleasdale, Frank Potts 2002

Beautifully- made Bordeaux blend. Far too cheap. See also their **Bremerview Shiraz 2002** which is even cheaper.

£10.30 The Vintage House, London W1 and about \$23 in the US

Step Road Sangiovese 2003

Tangy, refreshing, lively, reasonably true to type from 10 year- old vines.

£7.99– 8.25 Cellar Door of Overton, Mitchells of Sheffield, Wine Odyssey of Shalford

Zonte's Footstep Cabernet/ Malbec 2004

More mulberries. Very ripe with soft tannins. See also their **Verdelho 2004** and **Viognier 2004**.

£6.99 Unwins

See www.wineseacher.com for stockists outside the UK.

