The accountants invade vineyards down under

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First a warning: I am about to seem appallingly idealistic and unrealistically romantic.

People often ask me how on earth I can bear to write exclusively about a subject as narrow as wine. Doesn't it get boring? they say.

Now if you are a regular reader you probably have at least an inkling of what has kept me riveted to this little puddle called wine. It's not just that each year brings a new vintage, new tastes, new producers and new developments in vine-growing and wine-making. Nor that wine tends to be made in attractive places with good climates and some rather delicious local food. I think what has kept me riveted is wine people. They're such individualists. Crazy, half of them. Driven by a passion to make better and better wine, no matter what their accountants say. They make great companions, great subjects for a writer and, sometimes, great wines.

But I'm starting to feel a chill wind. The world of wine seems rapidly to be losing its humanity, its delightful idiosyncrasy. It is getting more and more like any other business activity.

What I used to like about wine was that there were no great big companies dominating the business. The biggest of the lot in terms of sheer turnover is still LVMH, Moët *et al*, which for all its worldwide dominance of the sparkling wine market has given the impression of being charmingly haphazard, almost amateurish (in a positive sense) at least in its approach to journalists and public relations. (Never having been in the wine trade, I can't vouch for how they deal with their customers but am told it is not too different.)

The next level of corporate mass has long been represented by the American giants Gallo (still, amazingly, a family firm) and the ballooning Canandaigua based in New York's Finger Lakes. Now these are very sophisticated operations, with every marketing trick in the book, but for a long time they didn't bother me because they were so preoccupied with their domestic market. Today however, their tentacles are everywhere. Gallo has all but circled the globe already. And Canandaigua, parent company Constellation described by its CEO on a slick website as 'a strong, diversified, responsive company with a no-nonsense, assertive approach to business', now has a large subsidiary in the UK and is likely to be looking even further afield for customers for its wines, beer and spirits.

But the gloomy news to me (as opposed to shareholders) is the current feverish agglomeration of companies at the next level down. It must be great to be an A & M [acquisitions and mergers] lawyer in Australia at the moment. But I do wonder whether all this cosying up between Australian and American companies and the interest shown in the wine business all of a sudden - after decades of neglect in most cases - by the global liquor giants is really in the longterm interests of wine lovers.

I may be wrong, but my experience over the last quarter-century suggests that exciting wines tend to come from excited people rather than corporate animals. And I'm particularly worried about Australia.

I spent 10 days earlier in the year tearing around some of country's furthest-flung wine regions and found one aspect of the trip both worrying and depressing. I tasted some extremely good, masses of competent and no duff wine. I met some great people and saw some beautiful country. I saw no shortage of evidence that Australia will achieve its much-touted goal of 'being the world's most influential and profitable supplier of branded wines', or basically achieving wine-world domination. In Britain, for example, its first and biggest export market, it is certain to overtake France to become the nation's number one wine supplier before the end of the year.

I would have laughed if you'd told me this five years ago but Australia's total vineyard area has grown 20 per cent to nearly 150,000 hectares (375,000 acres) in the last three years alone - to overtake each of Chile, South Africa, Germany, Bulgaria, Greece and Hungary.

On my trip I saw plenty of evidence of this frenzied planting - most of it expressly to supply the big companies and financed by investors seeking tax breaks - and became increasingly alarmed. I think the lowest point came when I was being driven round and round the brand new vineyards of the embryonic Fern Grove winery in Frankland, Western

Australia (three different winemakers in the first year of operation).

Each of these contiguous vineyards had a different name and different set of investors, each of them presumably attracted by a series of tax-effective years followed by a set number of years' income at the end of which the vineyard belongs completely to the management company, Fern Grove. My guide was a big company accountant by training (what else?) and he drove me over rolling country where sheep had previously safely grazed but which had now been planted with what seemed to be endless rows of identically and mechanically trained vines, flanked by investment vineyards from rival syndicates, all of them attracted by the low land prices. The total area of vines west of the little village of Frankland has grown from zero to 1500 hectares, or 3750 acres, in the last four years.

This particular estate is dotted with little chalets surrounded with vines in which the investors, mainly from Queensland on the other side of the country apparently, can install themselves for a weekend to gloat over their stake in the burgeoning wine business. And even though there is virtually nothing to do in Frankland, they are likely to be a happy lot. With what passes for excitement in accountant's language, my guide proudly reported 'we're already beating the yield per hectare forecast in our prospectus so our investors will probably get their return faster than they thought'.

Is this, I ask you, the sort of development likely to result in better wine for all? Will the wine world retain its excitement and diversity as the big get bigger and companies more profitable? I think not, but then I'm just an old-fashioned sentimentalist. Maybe I'll start writing about bee-keeping.