Australia pulls it off

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As forecast rather precociously more than a year ago, Australia has finally overtaken France in terms of the wine it sends to Britain - not in terms of volume admittedly, nor in terms of the whole UK wine market, but in terms of the value of wine sold retail, ie, off the shelf rather than in restaurants and bars.

This is surely a wake-up call for the French - even if admittedly it has been signalled for so long it will fail to provide much of a shock. Since 70 per cent of all wine sold retail in Britain is sold by the four big supermarkets, and since what they're really interested in is brands and all the slick promotional stuff that comes with them, it's hardly surprising that such brand supremos as the Australians have overtaken the French who can hardly rustle up a brand or an instore promotion between them. (Though for me it's Australia's smaller producers that are so much more interesting. There's a common conception that Australian wine equals super-technical brands but the picture is much more interesting than that.)

France will surely never lose its primacy in the fine wine market. The big problem for the French though is how to cope with the tens of thousands of politically significant vine growers whose produce is both made and marketed with such a lack of finesse.

In 2000, the last year for which the poor old OIV has figures (one direct consequence of all these new wine-producing nations is that the Office International du Vin gets its stats out so much later than it used to) France was still making 40 per cent more wine than she could sell.

Mind you, that depressing proportion is as nought compared with Spain's national wine surplus in 2000: a shocking 67 per cent.

The world is still producing a fifth more wine every year than it consumes. And most of it is of a quality that would be of no interest whatsoever to even the most desperate wine drinker.