What's hot in Australian wine

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Cautious is how I would describe the mood of Australian wine exporters, having spent some time recently in South Australia, the hub of the extraordinarily successful engine known as Brand Australia. They know that France is deploying a budget wildly in excess of anything they could afford to try to stem the tide that has been flowing so fast away from French wine and, very largely, towards Australian wine. They know that the corporate machinations of attempted and rumoured takeovers among the big companies that dominate the Australian wine scene, both producers and retailers, are unsettling – and that for its long term health the Australian wine industry needs to secure a solid distribution network for its more profitable, more interesting wines.

There is no shortage of more interesting alternatives to the cheaper brands currently scrapping for shelf space, promotional offers, BOGOFs [buy one get one free] and the like. The wave of new vine plantings may have come to a grinding halt about five years ago but it is still likely that some grapes will be left on the vine after the 2005 harvest currently underway, even though it will be considerably smaller in total size than the embarrassingly large 2004 crop. The big companies in many instances simply tore up grape contracts and growers have had to look for other buyers with newer labels or, in an increasing number of cases, start making wine themselves. Just what has happened in California in fact.

The good news for consumers is that in general, the cheaper bottles contain better quality wine from older vines than they did a few years ago, but this should be seen in the light of the following current trends.

Merlot is the cuckoo in the nest. Vast quantities of Merlot were planted at the end of the 20th century by those who believed that what sold well in the US with a California label would also be an Australian success. They were wrong.

Because it is not Shiraz, although it is the second most planted red wine grape in Australia, **Cabernet Sauvignon is also unfashionable**, selling at much lower equivalent grape prices. It follows that in a commercial range of equally-priced varietals, the Cabernet is likely to be better overall quality than the Shiraz. Wine professionals may admire the confident balance of fine Cabernets and Bordeaux blends from Margaret River in Western Australia such as Cullens and Moss Wood, the obviously terroir-dominated character of Coonawarra Cabernets such as Bowen and Hollick, the sleek charms of some Clare Cabernets, and even the bombast of a fully ripe McLaren Vale Cabernet as good as Chapel Hill and Coriole's Mary Kathleen, the average wine drinker seems to want Shiraz, Shiraz and more Shiraz, in an increasing variety of styles.

Cofermentation is the buzzword when it comes to Shiraz. Now that the white grape Viognier is, thanks to Yalumba's pioneering work, part of the Australian wine furniture, more and more producers have been fermenting these two north Rhône grapes together, as was supposed to be the tradition in Côte Rôtie – partly to stabilise the colour but more obviously to add the heady perfume of Viognier to the more structured Shiraz/Syrah fruit. Good value versions include the John Loxton 2003 Currency Creek (£7.99 Marks & Spencer), d'Arenberg's 2003 Laughing Magpie (£12.99 Bristol Wine Co, Great Gaddesden, Philglas & Swigott) and Zonte's Footstep 2004 Langhorne Creek (£7.99 at Sainsbury's, Unwins and The Wine Society). Particularly delicious from among many more serious examples are Yalumba's Barossa blend and Clonakilla's version from vineyards near Canberra while Torbreck's Run Rig and The Descendant are some of the most lauded.

After serious Chardonnay dependency, the Australian wine scene is now **mad about Pinot Gris/Grigio**. Anyone with Pinot Gris grapes to sell this year can virtually name their price, so popular is this fragrant, full bodied white with Australian wine drinkers, who are also **besotted by Sauvignon Blanc**. Only a few years ago you could count the number of racy, palatable Australian "Sav Blonk"s on the fingers of one hand – or perhaps on a single finger called Shaw & Smith, or at least Adelaide Hills – but now they are legion, and often blended with Semillon, notably but not exclusively in Western Australia, the blend being much more saleable than a varietal Semillon, however historic Hunter Valley Semillons may be. Rieslings are dry, pure and command a thoroughly decent price and reputation with a number of exciting newer producers on the scene such as Tin Shed and Kilikanoon.

Novelty is king. After years of depending almost solely on a handful of internationally famous grapes, Australian growers are now flirting outrageously with all sorts of recent immigrants in their vineyards. Tempranillo from Spain for example,

described as “Pinot on steroids” by Peter Leske of Nepenthe in Adelaide Hills, was hardly known in Australia five years ago but is now almost commonplace. Australians’ desire for new grape varieties can be stymied by the lumbering official quarantine system however. Riesling king Jeffrey Grosset may have to wait nearly five years before getting his hands on the Nero d’Avola he so passionately desires to see transplanted from western Sicily to Clare Valley. Sangiovese pioneers Coriole of McLaren Vale are harvesting their first Fiano grapes this year but the winemaker has little idea what to expect of them. Ben Glaetzer’s Heartland Dolcetto/Lagrein 2004 Langhorne Creek is the sort of product of imaginative grape growing plus talented winemaking that is increasingly common in Australia today, as is its expected retail price of nearly £10 a bottle when it arrives in the UK in August.

Old vine Grenache has been enjoying a renaissance. Grenache is not quite as admired as Shiraz but bottlings such as the great-value Turkey Flat 2002 (less than £11 at Noel Yong and the Sussex Wine Company) and, at the other end of the scale, Torbreck’s Les Amis show what can be done. Then there myriad hugely successful blends of Grenache, Shiraz and/or Mourvedre which have added hugely to the range of flavours and styles Australia has to offer.

Oak is in retreat. As elsewhere, Australians are buying much less new wood, and French rather than American oak is increasingly popular. It is now all but impossible to find overtly oaky wines of either colour. Australians are nothing if not responsive to the marketplace. The typical Chardonnay is almost lean nowadays.

Screwcaps are increasingly common, even for oaked reds. Australia and New Zealand must be the most uncomfortable wine regions in the world for cork producers to visit for the corkscrew is rapidly becoming redundant in both countries. When even Kay Brothers of McLaren Vale, which dusty old winery has hardly changed since the eponymous brothers bought it in 1890, is using screwcaps exclusively, the time for a cork revival is surely past – not least in view of the latest research showing that oxygen ingress is not necessary for wine ageing.

Alcohol levels are still rising. Just as it can be difficult to find anyone who admits to voting for George W Bush, it is nearly impossible to find an Australian winemaker who professes a desire to make particularly strong wines, but overall alcohol levels continue to rise remorselessly. It can be almost a relief to find a red that is “only” 14.5 per cent alcohol – and virtually impossible to find one that is less than 13.5. Increasingly potent yeasts are blamed but American specialist importers in particular have been urging some of the smaller, newer producers to go all out for sheer mass. Wines over 15 per cent can attract higher duties in some export markets however, and are supposed to be labelled Special Late Harvested to be allowed into the EU (though I have yet to see an example of this).