

South Australia

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

South Australia produces well over half of the raw material for Australia's wine industry and most of the large wine companies, many of the small, and all of the official wine trade organisations have their headquarters in the Wine State, whose capital is Adelaide, a city founded on wine. Wine areas are spread over a wide climatic range and are listed here in very approximately descending order of average temperature.

Riverland

After Riverina in New South Wales, this is Australia's quantitatively most important wine region, producing almost a third of the nation's crop. The efficiently irrigated, high-yielding vineyards way up the Murray River towards Victoria's own irrigated wineland supply grapes to major brands such as Banrock Station and Oxford Landing. Around townships such as Waikerie, Loxton, Berri and Renmark, grape growing has been going flat out to keep pace with the growth of Australian wine exports, thanks to government encouragement, but the recent drought years and consequent pressure on precious water supplies are a serious threat to the production of cheap grapes. Nevertheless, vineyards here continue to supply drinkable international varieties at rock bottom prices, ideally suited to oak chips if not to prolonged contemplation and discussion of their nuances.

Adelaide Plains

Two or three wineries persist on the hot flats north of the city. Primo Estate can produce some hand-crafted specialities, some of them from local fruit.

Barossa Valley

After a long period in the wilderness, the Barossa Valley is now recognised as Australia's quintessential wine region. There are many obvious physical similarities with California's Napa Valley - heavily laden vines growing on a fertile valley floor bounded by hills that are brown throughout the summer, an hour's drive north of the major city and desperately trying to stave off urban development and retain the valley's viticultural character. There is even an old railway running parallel to the valley's major north-south highway in both Napa and the Barossa. But whereas the Napa Valley's wine industry with its art galleries and music festivals is substantially founded on well-heeled emigrés from the professions or big business, the Barossa Valley is founded on an extraordinary social group, about 500 families of Prussian descent who emigrated here in the 1840s to escape discrimination and establish a modest, hard-working, Lutheran farming community.

They continue these traditions to this day. Tanunda has its Wursthau and its Kegelbahn. Marananga has its own brass band, headquartered a conveniently short march from the Gnadenfrei church. The settlers tried all manner of crops but vines were a particular success here and, thanks to the dogged work ethic of the 'Barossa Deutsch', a high proportion of the valley is still devoted to vines, some of them exceptionally old. Many of these grape growers (most of whom sell grapes rather than vinify) still speak German among themselves. The dusty, unpaved roads that criss cross the valley are hung with grape growers' signs, with hardly a non-German name among them.

In the 1970s and early 1980s the Barossa Valley was regarded as distinctly inferior to the new 'cool climate' regions which the Australian wine industry was developing. Thus, the giant wineries of Tanunda, Nuriootpa and Rowland Flat (many by now owned by multinational corporations) were proud to sell bottles with the words Coonawarra or Padthaway on the label, but tended to keep quiet about the fruit they bought on their own doorstep in the Barossa.

A new wave of smaller, local wineries, typically started up in the 1980s by escapees from the big companies (Peter Lehmann, St Hallett's, Rockford, Charles Melton et al) signalled a resurgence of pride in the Barossa Valley, particularly in the big, bold style of Shiraz that is the valley's signature. More recently, a rash of young winemakers such as Ben Glaetzer, Troy and Tony Kalleske and Kym Teusner are making waves with small volumes of lovingly crafted, complex reds. Torbreck was a trailblazer for this new generation.

Dry-farmed (non-irrigated) old vineyards on the cooler west side of the valley are the most treasured and provide fruit for Australia's most famous wine Penfolds Grange as well as for several top-quality concentrated bottlings such as Peter Lehmann's Stonewell, Rockford Basket Press and St Hallett's Old Block.

In the last 15 years there has been increased interest, as elsewhere, in the other Rhône varieties Grenache and Mourvèdre (which for years, as Mataro, was scorned). Barossa Chardonnay is another big, bold statement and can respond well, like Barossa reds, to American oak. Some of Australia's finest coopers are long established family companies based in the Barossa.

McLaren Vale

The growing suburbs of Adelaide are stretching remorselessly further south into what was once wine country so that only the most financially secure vineyards, or those too far from the city centre to be of current interest to the developers, survive. Yet (perhaps therefore) the winemakers of McLaren Vale south of the city are a determined, friendly lot who realise that they have much to offer the Australian wine industry. Local mesoclimates vary enormously according to altitude and exposure to cooling sea breezes. Some of the most successful wineries and vineyards occupy ridges with quite amazing views to the blue Gulf St Vincent, which is the starting point for most of Australia's wine exports. Old-vine Grenache, Shiraz and Cabernet produce seductive, generous reds, and some vineyards are cool enough for dazzling Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Notable achievers among wineries in this tight-knit community include Chapel Hill, Clarendon Hills, Coriole, D'Arenberg, Kay Brothers Amery, Geoff Merrill, Mitolo, Noon, and Wirra Wirra.

Langhorne Creek

South and east of McLaren Vale, on Lake Alexandrina, this slightly cooler wine region supplies vast quantities of useful blending material to the bigger companies, especially Cabernet and Shiraz. Smaller producers who – unusually – display the region's name on their labels with pride include Bleasdale and Brothers in Arms. Zonte's Footstep is an example of a brand successfully based on Langhorne Creek fruit.

Clare Valley

This is effectively a northern but considerably cooler extension of the Barossa Valley and one of the few wine regions of the world in which the great German grape Riesling comes into its own. Australian Rieslings are - not surprisingly in view of the climate - not at all like the German archetypes. They have much more body, a bit less acid (although winemakers tend to compensate for Nature's deficiencies in this respect) and a host of different flavours but are none the worse for that. Like all Rieslings, they age well. Clare Rieslings tend to reach 12 to 13 per cent alcohol and to show strong lime or some form of citrus flavours. With five or 10 years in bottle they can become distinctly toasty and some can even survive 20 or more years in bottle. A few producers occasionally manage to make sweet botrytised examples. Leo Buring was the great pioneer label here (now appearing as [Jim Barry's Florita – see tasting notes back to 1973](#)).

Unlike Eden Valley (see below), Clare is warm enough to ripen world-class Shiraz and Cabernet too, as well as some smart Chardonnays. Days are warm but sea breezes ensure that nights are much cooler than expected.

The southern, warmer part of Clare Valley goes by the name of Watervale.

Some favourite producers: Jeffrey Grosset, Kilikanoon, Knappstein, Leasingham, Mount Horrocks, O'Leary Walker, Petaluma, Pikes, Wendouree.

Coonawarra and the Limestone Coast

Coonawarra was Australia's first widely recognised top-quality wine region - and it even had its very own grape variety, Cabernet Sauvignon, to prove it. Coonawarra Cabernet can be a glorious thing, with all the structure, intensity and mineral overtones of a classed growth red bordeaux. The key to this flat, visually completely undistinguished mile-wide stretch of vineyards in the far south eastern corner of South Australia, within the bigger wine region known as the **Limestone Coast**, is its famous terra rossa, red loam or clay over a limestone base to ensure that quality precursor, good drainage. When the terra rossa peters out, so do the vines, and the wine industry has done its best to convert all available land to vines. Razing houses meant the elimination of what was already a sparse workforce, and Coonawarra is probably the most mechanised fine wine region in the world. Many commentators bemoan the influence of budget conscious big companies here, arguing that yields are too high, vineyards too mechanised. Certainly in cooler vintages some wines can

lack sufficient concentration for their austere frame, but there are always counter-examples from the likes of Balnaves, Bowen, Hollick, Katnook, Leconfiel, Wynns and Zema. Shiraz and Chardonnay can also prove their worth.

Padthaway, also within the larger Limestone Coast zone, made its name soon after Coonawarra but was such a one-company (Seppelt) wonder that too few operators have had a vested interest in putting the name on the label. Slightly warmer and even more remote than Coonawarra, Padthaway's strong point is white wine, especially Chardonnay, with a fine streak of natural acidity and good, round fruit. Lindemans is now the prime producer and Hardy's have invested in their Stonehaven winery here, although much of the fruit is vinified outside the region.

Other suitable land in this cool corner of the Wine State has been identified and developed in an around the newly christened wine regions of **Robe** and **Mount Benson** right on the coast (Cape Jaffa and Norfolk Rise are best known here) and **Wrattobully** between Coonawarra and Padthaway, where Brian Croser, founder of Petaluma, has set up his new estate Tappanappa.

Eden Valley

Higher and cooler than Clare, the more disparate Eden Valley immediately east of the Barossa Valley is Australia's other Riesling region. Narrow roads curve through the gum trees, past old homesteads on the way to vineyards as high as Mountadam (making excellent Chardonnay and Pinot Noir) and the neighbouring Pewsey Vale and Heggies vineyards of Yalumba, all in the favoured **High Eden** subregion. Road signs warn motorists of kangaroos, and parrots skitter through the trees. Rieslings here tend to have slightly lower alcohol, slightly less obvious fruit and to exhibit more floral than citrus characters than their Clare Valley counterparts- although they also become toasty with age. Winemakers many miles away such as the talented Pam Dunsford of Chapel Hill regularly plunder Eden Valley vineyards for their Riesling bottlings. The rocky Steingarten vineyard here has long produced some of Australia's most distinctive Riesling, now sporting a Jacob's Creek label because owned by the same company.

The Henschke family are the wine aristocrats of the Eden Valley and have red wine vineyards of such distinction (such as the famous ancient Hill of Grace planting of Shiraz) that they regularly make some of Australia's finest red wines from their base near Keyneton high above the Barossa Valley.

Some favourite producers: Henschke, Irvine, Mountadam, Chris Ringland, Thorne Clarke, Yalumba.

Adelaide Hills

McLaren Vale shades north east and the Eden Valley shades south into the Adelaide Hills, where a growing number of ambitious growers punctuate the leafy suburbs in the hills to the east of the city with expensive but rewarding vineyards. This is some of Australia's coolest wine country, cool enough to have established a reputation for its Sauvignon Blanc. Acid is rarely added here, and malolactic fermentation is encouraged in most wines to soften the naturally high grape acids. Chardonnays can have exceptional depth and ageing ability while growers are still experimenting with different red wine grapes. To the north, it is warm enough for Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz, proving that the region's varied topography and mesoclimate is suitable for a wide range of grape varieties, which all still display an attractive and characteristic freshness.

Some favourite producers: Ashton Hills, Chain of Ponds, Henschke, Tim Knappstein (TK), The Lane, Leabrook, Longview, Nepenthe, Petaluma, Shaw and Smith, Stafford Ridge and Geoff Weaver .

Newer regions

Even cooler parts of South Australia are now being developed as wine regions, notably **Kangaroo Island** off the coast and **Southern Fleurieu** within sight of this island famous for its edible as well as drinkable produce.