Tasmania

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Cool.
Main grapes: Pinot Noir (red); Chardonnay, Riesling (white).

Wine production on Tasmania has always been small, but its potential is now being realised. The proudly self-conscious island of Tasmania south of the state of Victoria is Australia's coolest, most distinctive wine region with a varied climate and terrain quite unlike anywhere on the mainland. A spate of new plantings in the early 1990s brought the total number of vine growers to 90, of whom hardly more than 20 made wine, and each of them only on a small scale. Today the number of producers is closer to 250 but only about 10% of those have more than 10 ha (25 acres) of vineyards.

Tasmanians are particularly fond of their own edible and drinkable produce and only about a quarter of the wine produced from their vineyards escapes from the island itself.

The oldest wine producer of note is Moorilla Estate in the south, which was established in 1958. However, among the continually changing roster of hopeful vine growers who have followed them, there is still considerable disagreement about exactly which of the island's varied wine districts, which tend to be clustered around Launceston in the north and Hobart in the south, is most suitable for viticulture.

Vineyards here benefit from many hours of summer sunlight, but average temperatures tend to be much lower than mainland Australia and in some years flowering and the harvest itself can be prejudiced by bad weather. Some Tasmanian winemakers argue that they should be excluded from the Australian national constraints on chaptalisation, adding sugar during fermentation to make up for a lack of natural, sun-ripened grape sugar, so cool are some summers. Of all Australian wine regions, Tasmania has the most to gain from climate change.

Most of the wines are obviously the produce of a cool climate, with their naturally high acidity, relatively subtle flavours and, often, good balance of clean fruit flavour - a build more German than New Zealand. The chief grape varieties planted are Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Riesling, and Cabernet Sauvignon and the well-made examples, which constitute by far the majority, tend to age particularly gracefully.

Aromatic, dry whites predominate but many producers, among them Pipers Brook (now owned by the Flemish company Kreglinger) in the wet and windy north east of the island, Freycinet and Apsley Gorge on the east coast and Domaine A in the warmish Coal River Valley north of Hobart, are making ambitiously styled, relatively concentrated reds. Tasmania is yet another place where Pinot Noir may flourish (as in New Zealand, Oregon, California, Chile, etc).

Over the years there has been considerable input from foreign, notably Swiss, investors but the island's Chardonnay and Pinot Noir fruit has attracted attention from champagne producers. Louis Roederer was for long in partnership with Heemskirk, one of the island's bigger producers, struggling to establish commercially viable north coast vineyards for Jansz, their lean, traditional-method fizz, now owned by Yalumba. Moët's Domaine Chandon ships grapes from the island to its Yarra Valley winery on the mainland and others have followed suit. Hardys' Bay of Fires winery in Pipers River is producing excellent sparkling results.

The small, isolated nature of the Tasmanian wine industry has enabled it to set up its own controlled appellation system for 100 per cent Tasmanian wines, of which it is particularly proud.

Some favourite producers: Apsley Gorge, Bay of Fires, Craigow, Domaine A, Freycinet, Home Hill, Jansz, Stefano Lubiana, Pirie, Pipers Brook, Tamar Ridge.