Western Australia

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

'WA', as this state is invariably known, may grow less than 5% of the country's grapes but it produces a very significant proportion of the country's best wine, entirely in the south-westernmost corner of this vast state, the biggest in Australia.

The most established wine region in south western WA is **Margaret River** (whose history dates all the way back to the 1960s), which is as close to paradise as I have been on my wine travels. Three hours' drive south of Perth is a virtually unpopulated surfer's paradise on a coast lined with gentle eucalyptus forests full of wild parrots and the odd kangaroo. Around the small settlement of Margaret River is a cluster of more than 100 wine estates making some of Australia's best-built Cabernets, sometimes blended with Merlot, some exceptionally long-living Chardonnay, some pretty good Shiraz and even Zinfandel. The region has more recently established a reputation for vibrant, occasionally grassy, Sauvignon/Semillon blends, first produced by Dr Michael Peterkin of Pierro, one of the many wine-mad medical practitioners to establish wineries here. Cape Mentelle (birthplace of New Zealand's Cloudy Bay), Cullen, Leeuwin Estate, Moss Wood and Vasse Felix make an almost indecent proportion of Australia's most refined wines.

To the south, Mount Barker, Frankland River, Denmark, Porongorup and Albany, all subregions within the **Great Southern** wine region, are home to some of the coolest and wettest vineyards in Australia. Plantagenet in Mount Barker produces fine Riesling and cool-climate style Shiraz. Denmark is a little warmer and seems better suited to Pinot Noir and Merlot. Vine-growing here is on a small scale and many producers rely on larger contract winemakers. The cool flavours and natural acids are vaguely reminiscent of New Zealand with some fine wines from the likes of Alkoomi, Frankland River, Howard Park, Plantagenet and Wignalls.

The greater volume of Western Australian wine is made to the north, however, in generally hotter vineyards close to Perth. The **Swan Valley**, conveniently close to the state's only population centre, was the traditional source of supply, with Houghton (a subsidiary of South Australia's Hardys and therefore part of the US giant Constellation) being the dominant producer. The full-bodied, aromatic, tangy dry white they used to call Houghton's White Burgundy and now sell more discreetly as HWB was Australians' favourite white before being superseded by New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. Moondah Brook (now also owned by Constellation) has demonstrated the quality of varieties such as Chenin Blanc and Verdelho in WA's older vineyards.

Vineyards have been established all along the coastal stretch between Swan Valley and Great Southern, most significantly in **Manjimup**, **Pemberton** and **Geographe**, where producers such as Chestnut Grove, Picardy and Salitage are achieving excellent results from a wide range of varieties, even Pinot Noir, in a cool-climate style.