Reactions to my Australian article

18 Apr 2009 by Jancis Robinson

My article How Australia went Down Under two weeks ago seemed to stir up more reactions than most of what I write. (More, perhaps significantly, than my many articles about 2008 bordeaux.)

The article semed to be widely circulated in the blogosphere. Australian viticulturist Dr Richard Smart wrote, 'I just read your article on Australia. I agree with the sentiments, and was about to write a similar one.' Jeremiah Josey of Boutique Wineries of Brisbane wrote, 'Great article you posted called "How Australia Went Down Under". You've got some really good points there as to what's happened to the Australian market. Too cheap and too shallow! Indeed! We have actually found a good number of our member wineries either shutting down or changing ownership, so we're seeing the results of too much price chasing and overproduction now coming home to roost.'

I was sent several Australian wines to taste as a result - notably from Palandri, the Margaret River winery to which I alluded in the article, how owned by a Chinese businessman whose holding company is called 3 Oceans. Here are my notes on the three wines I was sent.

Palandri, Vita Novus Riesling 2007 Frankland River 15.5 Drink 2009
Not sure about the Latin here. (Vita Nova?) Lightly herbal aroma with lots of positive lime fruit. Not one of the most delicate Australian whites but with good balance beteween sweetness and acidity. A bit short but serviceable. 12.5%
£8.99 City Beverage, Wine Importers Edinburgh, Oxford Wine Co, Bowland Forest Vintners, Village Wines Bexleym Sandhams Wine Merchants

Palandri, The Estates Sauvignon Blanc 2008 Frankland River 15 Drink 2009
Nice touch that the two specific vineyards that supplied the fruit are cited but this is pretty thin, lolly stuff. Fast fade and off dry. 12.5%
£8.99 City Beverage, Cambridge Wine Merchants, Oxford Wine Co, Oz Wines, Cotswold Vintners, Wine Importers Edinburgh, Wine World of Devon, Lindley Fine Wines

Palandri Vita Novus Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 Margaret River 15 Drink 2010-13
Definite whiff of Margaret River's distinctivelly minerally Cabernet here but it's spoilt by some very aggressive acidity on the finish that seems to rob the wine of fruit on the mid palate. Not a bad price for the appellation though. 14%
£10.99 City Beverage, Wine Importers Edinburgh, Oxford Wine Co, Bowland Forest Vintners, Village Wines Bexleym Sandhams Wine Merchants

David Gleave MW of UK importer Liberty Wines also wrote to me saying he had enjoyed my article so much that he had sent it to all his Australian producers 'to illustrate to them the way in which Aussie wines are perceived in the UK'. (In fact, a very significant proportion of Liberty's Australian producers were in the list of recommended producers at the end of my article.)

He wanted to ensure that I saw the latest releases under the Willunga 100 label that is 75% owned by Liberty, now that their grape growing partner has decided to concentrate on agriculture and bulk wine sales instead of bottled wine sales. The wines are made by Steve Pannell, ex head red winemaker at Hardy's, at the old Tatachilla winery.

The idea is that the wines should be made 100% from McLaren Vale fruit, and that 'we put all our costs into the wine. I feel that one of the problems with many Aussie wines that sell at £6-8 a bottle is that they have been engineered to be promoted at a lower price, something which is reflected in the cost of goods and, not surprisingly, in the quality of the wine.'

Ever obedient, I present my tasting notes on these two recent releases, having already been impressed by Willunga 100 Grenache chez Sainsbury's.

Willunga 100 Cabernet/Shiraz 2006 McLaren Vale 15.5 Drink 2009-10

70% Cabernet Sauvignon. Lively, full blooded, lots of fruit and life - though a little bit of added acid on the finish? A bit of char (all French oak apparently) but there is guts here. Decent value. 14%
£7.99 Everywine.co.uk, Noel Young Wines, Wimbledon Wine Cellars

Willunga 100 Shiraz/Viognier 2006 McLaren Vale 16.5 Drink 2009-11
5% Viognier. Scented and quite obviously scented by Viognier - maybe very slightly too much? - but attractive savoury, salty, transparent fruit on the palate. Very good value. 14.5%
£7.99 Everywine.co.uk, Noel Young Wines, Wholefoods