

## Croser on post-traumatic Australia

13 Aug 2009 by Brian Croser

*This is the complete text of a talk given by [Brian Croser](#) during the Landmark Australia tutorial, on the evening of the tasting described [here](#). The full title was 'A bold vision of Australia's future fine wine landscape' but as you will see from the initial remarks, he wasn't exactly at ease with the expectations he thought that would generate. (For all Landmark-related articles and tasting notes, see this [guide](#).)*

Someone in this room is having a lot of fun but it isn't me! The person who dreamt this title up has a perverted sense of humour and is probably sniggering at the thought of my struggle to address you on 'A bold vision of Australia's future fine wine landscape'.

To get some inspiration I turned to the word *vision* in the *Macquarie Concise Thesaurus*. It says, 'vision- delusion, fantasy, hope', and of the person who has the vision, the 'visionary-delusive, idealistic and unrealistic'.

Insult to injury, not only am I expected to delude you with my fantasy, it cannot be an every-day sort of fantasy it has to be *bold*, which my thesaurus translates as 'rash'.

I have been asked to announce to you a rash delusionary unrealistic fantasy about the Australian fine wine industry's future. If the Australian fine wine industry were a public company, this brief would land me in jail.

I know there are people in this room including the author of the title who think I am the perfect choice for the job description.

By chance, looking at the thesaurus in the column directly opposite 'bold' is the word 'bombastic' and here the sadist who invented the title missed a trick. He (or she) could have had me speak about 'A bombastic vision of Australia's future fine wine landscape'. For bombastic read, 'All piss 'n' wind, circumlocutory, demagogic, fustian, grandiose, infelicitous, inflated, orotund, overblown, pompous, swollen, tub-thumping, tumid and turgid.' Now as I am sure you will agree that sounds much more like my style.

So I am here to talk to you about a 'Bombastic vision of Australia's future fine wine landscape'.

To have a vision, unrealistic or not, the visionary has a starting point, the circumstance out of which the vision evolves. As defined in MacQuarie, a vision is always positive and involves ideals and hope. By definition visions aren't about things getting worse.

For the Australian wine industry in 2009 it almost seems they could not get worse. Apparently we have 20% too many vineyards, especially in cool areas, we have falling export volumes and plummeting unit values as bulk wine shipments and discounted branded commodity wine are shipped at any price to clear bloated inventories.

*[I queried that statement about '20% too many vineyards, especially in cool areas' with Brian Croser and this was his reply: 'I used the word "apparently" in front of that statement sarcastically. The mantra of the branded commodity producers and grape suppliers is that the surplus is in the cool climate areas which, as your question implies, is not the case, the surplus is with the vineyards that supply branded commodity most of which are in the hot areas but some also historically in the cooler areas (Barossa, McLaren Vale etc). My statement was too subtle by half in that it was meant to imply that the industry is so much in trouble that it is now blaming its great white hope for future success, the cool climate source of fine wine grapes.' JR]*

Even the inroads we have made into the important fine wine market in the US are reversing. According to Dr Jay Miller, Robert Parker's surrogate taster for Australia, US fine wine consumers have been turned off our fine wines by Brand Australia's less than \$10 'critter wines'"and where 'at the upper end of the market Shiraz has become the grape and Barossa and McLaren Vale the regions' there has been the flood of 'high alcohol, no terroir, and manufactured wines'.

He laments the lack of consumer knowledge about the other varieties from the Barossa and McLaren Vale, the 'superb Pinot Noir and Chardonnay' in 'Mornington Peninsula and Yarra Valley' and the 'Shiraz in Heathcote'.

Jancis Robinson is a good and honest friend to the Australian wine industry and she picked up on Jay Miller's 'Australia 2009: Into the Abyss' *Wine Advocate* article with the shocking observation that 'The sheer speed with which Australia has moved from being revered to being reviled is quite remarkable'.

Jancis, like Miller, laments the lack of visibility in the market of 'the host of great, increasingly subtle, wine made by people every bit as driven as Europe's finest vigneron'. Jancis also alludes to one of the resilient strengths of the Australian wine industry, saying that 'in academic circles, Australian wine research is still highly regarded'.

To emphasise Australia's wine plight, just in case someone interested in fine wine hadn't caught up with the news of our dire straits from Miller or Jancis, Eric Asimov quoted from both in the *New York Times* under the headline 'For Australian wine, a reversal of fortune'.

This then is a very appropriate starting point for a bit of vision.

What both Jancis and Miller are saying is that Australia's highly visible dominance of the branded commodity wine business is undermining the credibility of Australia's fine wine offerings. Further they are both saying that Barossa and McLaren Vale Shiraz have dominated Australia's fine wine presence because they have been promoted by offshore distributors in the promotional vacuum of the many other worthy Australian regions and varieties. Finally they are both saying that Australia has some very under-promoted and diverse fine wine treasures that deserve consumers' attention.

The Australian branded commodity wine business is not going to disappear and neither it should. It may contract in the face of competition and lack of water but it certainly should not dominate the image of Australian wine as it has done for two decades.

There are two wine industries in Australia, branded commodity made by a handful of large enterprises from mainly hot, inland, irrigation-dependent vineyards, largely purchased for everyday drinking from supermarkets by price-conscious consumers.

Then there is the Australian fine wine business composed of 2,500 small vigneron businesses and including the large producers in fine wine mode, scattered over the 62 mainly coastal, cooler, higher rainfall regions, increasingly only growing the varieties best suited to their region.

Their vines are reaching maturity and they are applying more and more fastidious and sustainable viticultural practices and less and less intervention in their winemaking. By comparison to any other fine wine producing nation they are well capitalised and are well educated in vine and wine technology and marketing and business practices. Their wine styles are distinctive and the quality is very good and getting better. Australia's domestic market cannot absorb all of their volume at the premium price they require and deserve, and they are hungry for the export opportunity that has so far eluded them.

The global fine wine market is very fragmented but those traditional European regions that dominate its commerce on the wine lists of the best restaurants and in the important collectors' cellars are well rewarded.

There is no shortcut to earning credibility from the global fine wine market.

Consistently natural and authentic wines demonstrating distinctive terroir-driven style and quality is a prerequisite. Australia's tradition of fine wine dating from the early 19th century and an outstanding reputation for research and education add some credibility.

In addition, the fine wine industry of Australia needs to develop strong long-term strategies for the promotion of and education of gatekeepers and consumers about Australia's diverse and unique fine wine regions.

The fine wine producers of Australia need to demand of our research institutions, elucidation of the environmental drivers of our unique wine styles, what really are the elements of our terroirs that create the differences and just how do we tweak our vineyards to make the best wine possible regardless of the cost?

What is required is a consistent Australian fine wine strategy quite distinct and separate from the efforts of the branded commodity wine industry. Branded commodity wine in Australia is the industry causing most of the bad news and the changes being wrought upon it are for the foreseeable future likely to dilute 'Brand Australia's' visibility on supermarket shelves because of competition and international cross blending and branding.

On the other hand, a decade of consistent effort could see Australian fine wine make inroads into the more than 70% market-value share that the four main traditional European producers have of the global fine-wine market.

Australia's fine-wine regions enjoy relatively cheap and available land comparatively free from urban pressures and pollution.

Global warming will impact on the Australian fine wine industry but to a lesser extent than northern hemisphere regions because of the ameliorative effect of the Great Southern Ocean on our south-eastern coastline where the industry is concentrated. In addition, a tradition of adaptation through research and technology change is likely to contribute answers.

Australia has the ready-to-go, assembled fine wine resources and will supply global markets with affordable fine wine to eventually become as important to fine wine as any of the traditional European suppliers.

Australia will achieve the fine wine potential recognised by Jancis and Jay Miller.

It is currently not obvious to observers and managers caught up by the damage of change that Australia has just finished two decades of branded commodity wine growth to dominance and inevitable decline and is now entering the decades of Australian fine wine emergence. As the trauma recedes, that will become apparent to all.

Upon reflection I don't think what I have said is bombastic or even bold. It is not even a vision because the fine wine industry I have described is already in place. Australia's large underutilised and able community of fine-wine producers are waiting for the right strategies around which their considerable energies and skills can be coordinated.

In the words of Dr A C Kelly from *Winegrowing in Australia* published in 1867, which I have often quoted: 'The time has come when the winegrowers of this colony must bestir themselves and boldly face the difficulties before them. They must be prepared to take their stand on the ground already occupied by the experienced winegrowers of Europe.

'All have a direct interest in each other's success, for according to the quality of wine produced for export will be our status as a winegrowing country.

'No petty jealousies need stand in the way of that friendly rivalry to produce the best wine which ought to be the endeavour of each winegrower.'