

## Australia's artisan winemakers

12 Oct 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

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If I were [Julian Castagna](#), or Claudio Radenti, or [Vanya Cullen](#), or Tim Kirk (pictured), or [Tom Shobbrook](#), or any one of Australia's army of artisan winemakers, I would be furious. But perhaps they don't realise what a mismatch there is between their nit-picking travails in the vineyard and cellar and the general image of Australian wine as an over-processed, over-marketed and over-discounted, thoroughly industrial product.

This is a view still promulgated by many a French winemaker but not by any who have actually been to Australia's wine regions, which now seem to be teeming with small-scale vigneroni who have travelled and are much more likely to be taking a Burgundy domaine as their model than to be blindly following the hi-tech strictures of an Australian oenology degree.

I can remember when there was precisely one practitioner of organic viticulture in the whole of Australia but now producers as admired and garlanded as Cullen of Margaret River and Jasper Hill of Heathcote are openly practising biodynamics. It can't have been easy to explain nettle teas and buried cow horns initially to laconic Aussies but [Ron Laughton of Jasper Hill](#) had the advantage of being a food scientist before establishing his own vineyard, and was moved by pragmatism to do what he does.

There are even Australian practitioners of the much-discussed 'natural' winemaking practices, involving minimal chemical additions during winemaking, notably low or no sulphur. Last week Britain's most enthusiastic importer of this polarising style of wine, Les Caves de Pyrène, showed off its new Australian imports, and a very varied bunch they were too. There were some stunning wines, such as Sorrenberg's 2009 Chardonnay from Beechworth that gave white burgundy a serious run for its money (and has a very burgundian price) and his neighbour Castagna's Un Segreto 2008 based on the Tuscan grape Sangiovese with additional fruit from Shiraz.

But there were also some seriously strange wines, at high prices, that somehow seem all the stranger for coming from Down Under although Anton Von Klopper, maker of probably the, ahem, least mainstream examples, is originally South African, apparently. I would suggest that this phrase lifted from Caves de Pyrène's online wine list, '*Anton and family are now part of the Basket Range community*', is a bit of a hostage to fortune for those not familiar with Adelaide Hills geography. The charismatic Von Klopper likens his way of winemaking to sailing, while a conventional winemaker might simply navigate from A to B without help from the wind.

I think it is a very healthy sign that, for the first time as far as I know, Australia is now home to these extremes of wine production, and that more and more winemakers are prepared to step off the well-trodden paths of conventional, by-the-book wine production - in particular that there is much less knee-jerk addition of acidity and sometimes tannin. For me a wine should ideally taste natural, but should also be healthy and robust enough to develop into something more interesting after time in bottle.

It is even possible to make beautiful, natural-tasting wines that end up on the shelves of a UK supermarket. Tim Kirk of Clonakilla, the most famous producer in the small wine region around the capital Canberra, makes not only super-subtle wines from the vineyards around his home, but also a blend of Shiraz from Hilltops, an hour and half's drive away. Waitrose are currently selling it online and in two of its most wine-minded branches for £17.99.

The subtlety of Clonakilla's Syrah-based wines, inspired by Tim Kirk's travels to Côte Rôtie in 1991, has been hugely influential in Australia, with a whole new generation of young winemakers realising that not all Shiraz has to taste as though it were made from raisins. Newcomers such as Tom Shobbrook, a great friend of Von Klopper and another whose wines are imported into the UK by Caves de Pyrène, has shown that even somewhere as hot as the Barossa Valley can produce really fluid, caressing red from the grape he deliberately chooses to call Syrah rather than Shiraz.

But perhaps the most marked evolution in Australian winemaking has been in the increasing austerity of the whites. Oz Chardonnay shed its flab some years ago, and not just among Australia's artisan winemakers but in the mainstream, too. Indeed a Wolf Blass Yellow Label Chardonnay 2009 retailing at £7.49 was taken for a smart white burgundy in this year's Master of Wine exams by more than half the candidates (see [this thread](#) on our Members' forum), and one of Wine Australia's favourite tactics currently is to show off some of its better Chardonnays blind with famous French counterparts (see [Chardonnays - Oz v the rest](#)). When there is enough fruit as well as refinement and acidity, Australian Chardonnay

can be stunning, although, as usual, fashions tend to encourage extremism and in some quarters leanness alone is seen as a virtue.

Australians have long championed bone-dry Rieslings, notably in their Riesling districts of Clare and Eden Valleys, but again, some can seem deliberately targeted at masochists when tasted young.

But this is to pick holes. Overall, contrary to its reputation as being good only for 'critter labels' and 'dead-grape' wines, Australia is a wonderful source of hand-crafted wines, even if nature is throwing huge obstacles - both drought and flood - in the path of its ambitious wine artisans. One British wine importer has identified and stuck with some of Australia's finest artisan winemakers throughout its 14-year history.

Liberty Wines showed off the latest releases from its growing stable of top-quality Australian producers recently and asked the antipodean visitors to show 'wines I wish were mine...'. Thus, Vanya Cullen showed a Leflaive Puligny, John Durham of Plantagenet a Château de Fonsalette Côtes du Rhône, Stephanie Toole a Kracher Beerenauslese, Jeffrey Grosset a Dönnhoff Riesling, David LeMire of Shaw and Smith a Rousseau Charmes-Chambertin, Charles Melton an Isola e Olena Vin Santo, John Duval (ex Penfolds Grange winemaker) a Chave Hermitage Blanc, Zar Brooks of Dandelion a J J Prüm Auslese, Andre Bondar of Mitolo a Clape Cornas, Tim James of Liberty's own-label Willunga a Mascarello Barolo, Steve Flamsteed of Innocent Bystander a Ramonet Chassagne, Bill Downie a super-natural Overnoy Houillon Jura red, Nick Farr a Dujac Clos St-Denis, Alberto Antonini and Mark Walpole of Greenstone, another Liberty initiative, a Soldera Brunello, and Tim Kirk a Rostaing Côte Rôtie.

These Australians really do understand wine quality.

## **SOME CURRENT FAVOURITES**

Bindi, Block 5 Pinot Noir 2008 Macedon Ranges

Castagna, Adam's Rib 2008 Beechworth

Larry Cherubino, Ad Hoc Riesling 2009 Mt Barker

Clonakilla Shiraz 2009/10 Hilltops

Cullen, Diana Madeline 2008/9

William Downie Pinot Noir 2008 Gippsland

Freycinet Chardonnay 2005/6/9 Tasmania

Giaconda Chardonnay 2008 Beechworth

Giant Steps, Sexton Chardonnay 2008/9 Yarra Valley

Grosset Rieslings 2010 Clare Valley

Kooyong, Faultline Chardonnay 2009 Mornington Peninsula

Shobbrook Seppeltsfield Syrah 2009 Barossa Valley

Sidewood Reserve Syrah 2008 Adelaide Hills

Tappanappa, Tiers Chardonnay 2008 Adelaide Hills

Ten Minutes by Tractor, McCutcheon Chardonnay 2009 Mornington Peninsula

Warrumbungle (various bottlings) Northern Slopes

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