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## 50 Rutherglen stickies



**6 December 2018** We're re-publishing this account of an extraordinary tasting six years ago, in anticipation of my forthcoming list of recommended sweet and strong wines to be published on Saturday.

**21 March 2012** The notes below on the 50 current bottlings of one of the world's great wines were taken at a rather extraordinary, and extremely unexpected, tasting for just me and Australian wine writer Max Allen in Melbourne last month. See [Rutherglen ambush](#) for more details.

The sweet, fortified 'stickies' of Rutherglen are hugely distinctive wines, and – along with [Hunter Semillon](#) – the style is one of Australia's unique gifts to the world of wine. These dental nightmares owe their extremely high sugar levels to the hot, dry climate of Rutherglen in the north east corner of the state of Victoria where nights are cooled by the Victorian alps – and

autumns are (generally) so reliably dry that grapes can be left on the vine to shrivel and notch up extreme Baumés. It is not unusual for one of these wines to have a residual sugar level of 250 g/l.

The two principal grapes for these wines are Brown Muscat, a particular red-skinned version of the small-berried Muscat (the one responsible, for example, for most French *vins doux naturels*) and Muscadelle, known for years in this part of the world as Tokay - until the Hungarians objected. So now, as recounted in this [wine of the week](#), it has been officially renamed Topaque.

The wines are fortified early to retain the sweetness, like port, and aged in very old casks for differing lengths of time according to style, but the ages specified below are more impressionistic than actual. A blend designed to taste like a 10-year-old wine might be a blend of much older and much younger wine for example. Very important in fashioning the wine is exactly where it is aged. Some of the eight members of the Rutherglen Network, the close-knit association of producers, have hotter and /or drier cellars than others. Some, like the Morris cellar shown above, are little more than tin-roofed shacks. Floors may be dirt or concrete, with effects on the ambient humidity and temperature.

Most but not all producers maintain old stocks as soleras, and there is heritage involved in the people too. Several of the producers were founded in the mid-19th century and at least one winemaker is seventh generation. See details of all eight [here](#).

A stylistic classification of the wines has been drawn up thus, in ascending order of apparent age, and price:

**Rutherglen** The foundation of the style; displaying fresh fruit aromas, rich fruit on the palate, clean grape spirit and great length of flavour. Should taste approximately like a five year old.

**Classic** A maturing style imparting greater levels of richness and complexity; exhibiting the beginnings of 'rancio' characters produced from prolonged maturation in oak. Should taste approximately like a 10 year old.

**Grand** A mature style with greater intensity and mouth-filling depth of flavour, complexity and viscosity; producing layers of texture and flavour with seamless integration of the flavours of fruit, grape spirit, and mature oak. Should taste approximately like a 15 year old.

**Rare** The richest and most complete wines; displaying deep colour, intense fruit and 'rancio' characters, rich viscous texture and extreme depth of mellowed complex flavours. Should taste approximately like a 20+ year old.

The Topaques generally have slightly more obvious acidity and a certain greenness of both colour and aroma while the Muscats are even sweeter and can have a reddish tinge, though the older the wines, the more the difference between the two styles are eroded.

The Rutherglen Network members were obviously cheered by the fact that sales of fortified wine, representing only about 4% of all wine in Australia, had risen last year although they admitted that the recent revival of [Seppeltsfield in South Australia](#) may have played a part in this.

Note that these wines are ready to drink when they are bottled, which is why the drinking dates below are all the same. Though of course it is difficult for us consumers to distinguish between different bottlings of the same producer's offering of a single style.

At the tasting we tasted by style but the notes below are sorted alphabetically by producer (sur)name, by grape variety and then in ascending richness. I may have been even meaner than usual with my scores. There is, quite literally, nothing to compare them with, so I was marking them by their own high standards.

## ALL SAINTS

- All Saints, Topaque NV Rutherglen Pale bright orange tawny. Very sweet almost sugary nose. Raisiny with maltiness. Bit of grip on the finish. Bit sweet and sickly. Drink 2012-2014  
15.5
- All Saints, Grand Topaque NV Rutherglen One of the lightest. Yellow/green rim. Big leap up from their Classic. A bit syrupy. Meat extract plus malt. Not great length. Drink 2012-2014  
16
- All Saints, Rare Topaque NV Rutherglen Dark brown. Malty nose. Sweet and a little simple. Lots of acidity on the finish - bitter treacle? Drink 2012-2014  
17
- All Saints Muscat NV Rutherglen Fox red. Very sweet and sticky again. Thick creamy syrup. But actually finishes reasonably dry and smoky. Fun! Good classic straightforward Liqueur Muscat. Vinolok. Best value All Saints wine? Drink 2012-2014  
16.5
- All Saints, Classic Muscat NV Rutherglen Yellow rim. Very sweet indeed. Bit sticky. Chewy and a bit awkward. Drink 2012-2014  
16
- All Saints, Grand Muscat NV Rutherglen Dark fox red with some yellow at the rim. Very sweet and round and a savoury finish. Quite chewy. Drink 2012-2014  
16.5
- All Saints, Rare Muscat NV Rutherglen Paler than most. Not that expressive on the nose. Just a tad simple considering what its age must be. Drink 2012-2014  
16.5

## BULLER WINES

- Buller, Classic Topaque NV Rutherglen Rather old wood? Then exotic almond liqueur notes. Very sweet. Quite concentrated. Chewy finish with some alcohol. Drink 2012-2014  
16
- Buller, Grand Topaque NV Rutherglen Goes back to 1996 for the youngest ingredient. Very dark brown, a bit PX-like in terms of the concentration. Salty and a bit astringent. Drink 2012-2014  
16.5
- Buller, Rare Topaque NV Rutherglen Brown. Mousy nose. Very thick and syrupy. Pretty extraordinary! Need to serve in a dropper? Drink 2012-2014  
16.5
- Buller, Classic Muscat NV Rutherglen Very dark. Chestnut colour. Savoury, meaty, a bit metallic on the end. Sweet start and then very spirity on the finish. Drink 2012-2014  
15.5
- Buller, Grand Muscat NV Rutherglen Very dark. Lots of rancio. Surely from a very old lot? Dramatic but the sweetness covers any palate punishment most successfully. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Buller, Rare Muscat NV Rutherglen From 1996 back to 1975. Dark brown. Lifted. From the corner of the bodega in terms of age. Almost bitter treacly note on the finish. Quite dry on the end. Too concentrated? But I feel mean making the criticism... Drink 2012-2014

16.5

## CAMPBELLS

- Campbells, Topaque NV Rutherglen Savoury nose. Quite subtle and already with some age impression. Tastes too old for the classification? Treacly edge. Refreshing finish. The driest. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

- Campbells, Classic Topaque NV Rutherglen Orange with greenish rim. Macerated raisins on the nose. Again, drier and tangier than the norm. Very lifted and the start of rancio character. Treacly finish. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Campbells, Grand Topaque NV Rutherglen Dark brown with a yellow rim. Positively savoury on the nose. Very luscious texture and almost painful concentration and acidity. This tastes extremely old! Treacle. I wouldn't mind a bit more sweetness here. But it is certainly dramatic. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Campbells, Rare Topaque NV Rutherglen Very shiny blackish brown with orange/yellow rim. Rose-petal nose. Really rather charming and interesting and there is a strong green streak. A bit astringent but oval with lots of interest here. Drink 2012-2014

17.5

- Campbells Muscat NV Rutherglen Transparent. Lifted and not that obviously Muscat on the nose. Racy and quite savoury with even a little dry note on the end. Like dried fruit peel – something southern Italian *pasticceria* about this. Drink 2012-2014

16

- Campbells, Classic Muscat NV Rutherglen Fox red. Very lifted and actually not all that Muscatty. Fresh fruit, very nice balance – great refreshing drink - but much more obvious acidity than in most Muscats so not that grapey – quite like the Topaque. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

- Campbells, Grand Muscat NV Rutherglen Dark brown. Heady floral nose. Sweetness completely trumps the acidity and rancio. Lively and racy despite all that maturity. Drink 2012-2014

17.5

- Campbells, Rare Muscat NV Rutherglen Brown black. Not sure I would sense this was a Muscat on the nose. Very concentrated with a hint of old oak there. Dry finish. A real elixir but a bit painful. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

## CHAMBERS ROSEWOOD

- Chambers Rosewood, Topaque NV Rutherglen Mid tawny. Slightly musty wood on the nose. Sweet and quite heavy. Raisiny. A bit of spirit on the end. Drink 2012-2014

15.5

- Chambers Rosewood, Classic Topaque NV Rutherglen An oddity available in Oz only. Dark brown with a greenish rim - older than the rest? But not much nose...? Very syrupy texture. The rancio aromas transport me straight to Funchal! Lots of ancient appeal here and great balance but it does seem older than the category. 'Had a mixed and interesting life this wine. Originally started in the early 1990s and it has been a result of discards from the Grand and Rare'. Their Rutherglen Topaque is definitely older than their Rutherglen Muscat. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Chambers Rosewood, Grand Topaque NV Rutherglen Blackish brown. Intriguing nose - hint of coffee - though introvert and not aromatic. A tiny bit musty and starting to be quite dry and chewy but with massive sugar and alcohol. Bit hot on the end. Refreshing finish. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Chambers Rosewood, Rare Topaque NV Rutherglen Thick dark brown. Like fermented treacle toffee. Very chewy finish. Quite demanding. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Chambers Rosewood Muscat NV Rutherglen Pale rosy tawny. Again some old oak on the nose here. Very sweet and thick. Lots of personality here but both sticky and dry on the end. Tastes too complex for a Rutherglen wine. Maybe should be Classic? Drink 2012-2014

16

- Chambers Rosewood, Grand Muscat NV Rutherglen Dark brown. Rancio but quite muted. Very sweet with strong tea-leaf aromas. Edgy and racy and interesting even if quite astringent. Treacle toffee and finishes quite dry. Prune juice. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Chambers Rosewood, Rare Muscat NV Rutherglen Brown black but with enormous sweetness and rather metallic dryness and austerity in the end. Really taken to a limit of concentration and with a hint of some curry spice - cumin. Just too much like hard work. Too dry on the end. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

## MORRIS

- Morris, Classic Topaque NV Rutherglen Pale dark tawny with some green at the rim. Very broad and smooth. Butterscotch and markedly malty. Chewy and vital finish. Long. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

- Morris, Grand Topaque NV Rutherglen Fox red and dark brown. Light fresh nose. Very vibrant and with definite rancio. Some malt and nicely balanced. Much more intense luscious fruit than most. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Morris, Rare Topaque NV Rutherglen Almost black! Rose petals. Almost as though there is some Muscat in there. Lovely palate impact though no great persistence. Drink 2012-2014

17.5

- Morris Muscat NV Rutherglen Mid fox red. Darker than most. Treacly and very sweet but with a great tang on the end. Rather a grunty Muscat. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

- Morris, Classic Muscat NV Rutherglen Dark reddish tawny. Edge of liquorice and treacle. Very

very sweet! Wading through molasses here. Very intense. Seems really very old. Too old for the category? Lot of texture. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

- Morris, Grand Muscat NV Rutherglen 15 years average. Much blacker and denser than most. Hot tin roof on the nose – and not that much varietal aroma. Extremely sweet and thick and concentrated syrup of figs. Really out on a limb. What on earth is the Rare going to taste like?! A little acid on the end but overall an extraordinary relic! Drink 2012-2014

18

- Morris, Rare Muscat NV Rutherglen 20 years average. Extraordinarily dark. Intensity but balance too. Very sweet indeed – a total tooth-rotter – but you can see the Muscat and rose petals still. Then a bit acidic and concentrated on the end, but an exceptionally good wine that might just require a special category of its own; Very Rare Indeed. Arguably the Grand is better balanced. Drink 2012-2014

18

## PFEIFFER WINES

- Pfeiffer, Topaque NV Rutherglen Orange tawny. Lift and that green streak of Muscadelle. Fresh fruit and a slightly dry finish. Refreshing and a burnt molasses finish. Bit chewy on the end. Drink 2012-2014

16

- Pfeiffer, Classic Topaque NV Rutherglen Orange and quite pale – especially relative to the rest. Quite savoury and with lot of acidity and saltiness. Relatively light but well balanced. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

- Pfeiffer, Grand Topaque NV Rutherglen Not as deep and dusty as some and with quite a lot of acidity on the finish. Lots of acidity and not too demanding. Not extreme. Big and almost blowsy and sweet and fruity – less intense than most. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Pfeiffer, Rare Topaque NV Rutherglen Paler than most. Mid level of dark tawny but these wines are simpler than old wines from older houses. Drink 2012-2014

17

- Pfeiffer Muscat NV Rutherglen Transparent red tawny. Not 100% clean on the nose. Relatively light bodied and quite chewy on the end. Different and more angular than most. Drink 2012-2014

16

- Pfeiffer, Classic Muscat NV Rutherglen Quite light. Rose petals and green vegetation on the nos. All Pfeiffer wines lighter and more transparent than most. Very pure chocolate and roses flavours. Dry finish. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

- Pfeiffer, Grand Muscat NV Rutherglen Sweet and rosy and transparent on the nose. Fresh and fruity and easy – like fermented Christmas cake with the merest hint of woodiness. Drying finish. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

- Pfeiffer, Rare Muscat NV Rutherglen Paler than most. Tea leaves and refreshment on the nose. Nothing like the intensity on the palate of most of the others and quite acidic rather than luscious. Clean and refreshing though. Drink 2012-2014

16.5

## RUTHERGLEN ESTATE

- Rutherglen Estates, Classic Muscat NV Rutherglen Greenish fox red. Correct and well balanced. Quite refreshing but with less personality arguably than some others. Decent introduction. Drink 2012-2014  
16.5

## STANTON & KILLEEN

- Stanton & Killeen, Topaque NV Rutherglen Bright orange. Floral nose. Very fresh and fruity and refreshing and well balanced. Good green streak. Drink 2012-2014  
16.5
- Stanton & Killeen, Classic Topaque NV Rutherglen Rose-petal aroma. Very clean and fresh and luscious though not that much rancio. Lots of charm and spice. Drink 2012-2014  
17
- Stanton & Killeen, Grand Topaque NV Rutherglen Not as dark as most. Light foxy tawny. Very juicy fruit and firm and lots of acidity. Very dancing and nicely balanced. Racy and refreshing. Drink 2012-2014  
17.5
- Stanton & Killeen Muscat NV Rutherglen Mid to deep fox red. Lively broad and creamy with strong Muscat character and great fruit and coffee character. Really complete. Zesty. Lovely stuff! Because not just sweet. Drink 2012-2014  
17
- Stanton & Killeen, Classic Muscat NV Rutherglen Bright rich red. Quite a lot of lift and tension on the nose. A skein of bitterness. Liquorice. Really quite concentrated – big step up from Rutherglen – not sure for the better. Not as obviously Muscat. Bit raw. Very thick and concentrated. Drink 2012-2014  
17
- Stanton & Killeen, Grand Muscat NV Rutherglen Very dark brown. Unctuous and treacly. Lot of refreshment as well as the sweetness. Quite complete but a little bitter on the end. Thick! Drink 2012-2014  
17
- Stanton & Killeen, Rare Muscat NV Rutherglen Dark blackish brown. Savoury meat extract. Malt too. Very 'out there'. Chewy and acid and extreme. Drink 2012-2014  
17.5