

THE GLASSHOUSE

WINE APPRECIATION SOCIETY

MODULE 14

AUSTRALIA

THE 'MIRACLE' WINE PRODUCER OF THE WORLD



History and Background

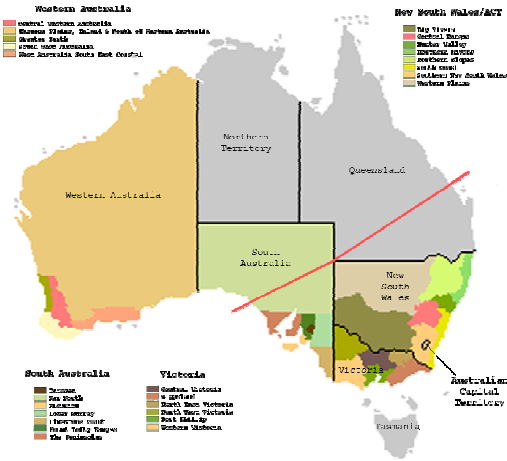
WE NOW TAKE SO MUCH FOR GRANTED THAT AUSTRALIA AND AUSTRALIAN WINES ARE A MAJOR PART OF THE GLOBAL WINE SCENE THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO OVERLOOK JUST HOW RECENT THIS PHENOMENON ACTUALLY IS.

Whatsmore Australia is unique among the world's wine producers in that vines are not at all native to the country. 'On 24th January two bunches of grapes were cut in the Governor's garden from cuttings of vines brought three years ago from the Cape of Good Hope' – diary of Watkin Tench in 1791.

As recently as 1983 Australia produced 8.9 million litres of wine worth \$9.6million, and this was so small that it did not even register a mention in the list of world wine exporters. By 2004 Australia produced 575 million litres of wine with exports worth \$2.6 billion. And its exports had grown to be the fourth largest in the world – only behind France, Italy and Spain. In the UK the Ozzies have beaten everyone else!

Australia approached wine production as a land filled with both small and very large, but always positive and progressive, farmers might. They got stuck in! They developed, in almost no time at all, a hugely mechanised and technically advanced new agricultural sector.

At the same time they produced a band of technically advanced oenologists from newly established university wine schools – most notably in Adelaide (actually founded in 1955 – when the modernisation of wine production began). Such technical depth and prowess quickly asserted itself around the world as so called 'flying' wine makers filled their own quiet months of September and October (down under) by becoming involved in European wineries at their busiest time.

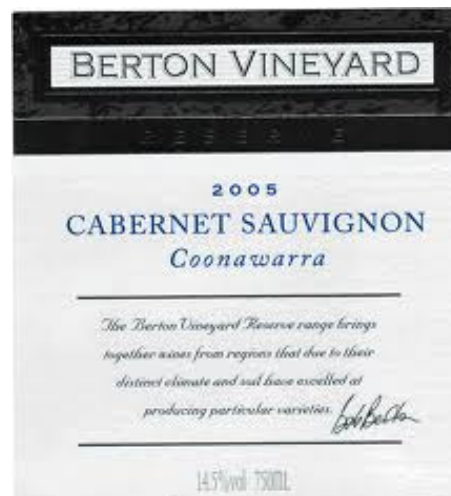


The other 'unique at the time' factor that Australian wine makers brought - and which defines its position has been the importance of the fruit. Again, it now seems so obvious - but back in the late 1970s and early 1980s pretty much the one word you would not find on any bottle of wine was the grape or grapes from which it was made. (And this is still mostly the case in France). Being farmers first and wine makers second it is perhaps not at all surprising that Australian wine makers wanted to emphasise the fruit – and increasingly the technology. As Jancis Robinson notes...

'It is not too fanciful to suggest that the wines (of Australia) have an openness, a confident, user friendly style which reflects the national character (and climate). Australian winemakers have opted to preserve as much as possible of the flavour of the grape. Yet to do so with a delicacy of touch, producing intensely fruity white wines and soft, mouth filling red wines which appeal to the heart as much to the mind. In so doing they have sacrificed structural complexity at the altar of simple fruit flavour'.

Add to that a penchant for great marketing and export drive – and you have the success story that is Australian wine. Also without any agricultural subsidy!

The impact on the world of wine has been dramatic. The new technical approach to wine making and excellent production management has helped to galvanise the wine makers of the old world. The French, in particular, became intrigued by the success of Australian wines in export markets. More about fruit and consistency and less about terroir – Australia showed how making it easy for the modern consumer would reap benefits. With the growing volumes they targeted the British supermarkets and established new price points of affordability and quality of consistency. In the 1980s the French were still often getting away with poorly made wines disguised as being 'complex' or 'terroir driven' – often this was bogus. French wine has improved enormously in the past 20 years as it has had to compete with these young upstarts. But now the influence is moving the other way too. If you are in French or Italian winery during harvest time you will often find different languages and accents from the southern hemisphere. The oenologist from the southern hemisphere are learning too and taking back ideas to Australia, New Zealand, Argentina and Chile. Having mastered large scale production and technical consistency Australian wine makers are now also looking to develop terroir driven styles of wine.



The Australian influence became very significant very quickly in the world of wine – and this has unquestionably been the single biggest influence in the globalisation of wine, and most of its trends, at the end of the 20th century.

Geography, Wine Production and Logistics

All of Australia's wine is grown in the southern states where there is a chance of cooler winters, reasonable rainfall and where the main river systems flow. There are four main growing areas: Western Australia – around the Margaret River; South Australia, in the Barossa Valley and Riverlands; New South Wales – in the Hunter Valley and Murrumbidgee and Victoria. Tasmania is a further but smaller producer.



The wine industry, as defined by the wine produced, is owned broadly speaking by three major companies: Treasury Wine – formerly owned by the Fosters Brewing Group (and the second largest wine producer in the world) – Lindemans, Rosemount and Penfolds; Constellation Brands (the largest wine producer in the world) – Hardy's and Banrock Station; Pernod Ricard – Jacob's Creek, Orlando, Wyndham Estates. These account for almost 95% of the entire annual grape crush – but there are at least 2,000 wine growers who own small parcels of land. Nearly all these small producers arrived after 1970!

Australian farmers had, by the 1950s, developed a refrigerated transport system that allowed produce to be transported hundreds if not thousands of miles to wherever an available use for the produce happened to be. The use of pristine stainless steel storage tanks added the final component for the industry to be able to increase the volumes of wine grown. The final link in the 'growth' story was the suitability of the big wines – Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz – for whole scale planting. In 1994 these big three accounted for 27% of production (the balance being the old wines used in cheap blends and the fortified wine sector – Doradillo and Trebbiano) – by 2004 the big three accounted for 60%.

Standards of wine growing and production are very high. With The Australian Research Institute in Adelaide at its pinnacle there are many wine schools at the major universities – and this explains why Australia has become known for its expertise. The new breed of Ozzie wine entrepreneurs are steeped in technical excellence. It's not just about vast swathes of stainless steel tanks either. Because of the often drought like conditions the Australians have also led the world in modern canopy management which optimises the growing conditions of the fruit.



Australia now produces almost 15 million hectolitres of wine (up 73% in five years alone, 2000 - 2005) from 160,000 hectares. Australia grows all the major grape varieties – with some of its output – the unwooded Semillon of the Hunter valley or the Muscats and Tokays of north east Victoria having no direct comparison elsewhere in the world.

The main grape varieties

Shiraz – is the historic giant of the Australian wine industry and the first commercial grapes grown. This accounts for 41% of all reds and 24% of all wines

Cabernet Sauvignon – about 30% of red wine and 17% of all wines. At its greatest at Coonawara in Victoria where the temperature is similar to Bordeaux

Merlot – of increasing importance and accounting for 10% of all red production and 6% of all grape production

Chardonnay – sometimes derided for the cheap oak dominated wines of the 1990s and responsible for the ABC response to 'what wine can I get you – anything but chardonnay!' but still a huge growth story – accounting for 19% of all the wine produced in Australia

Semillon – closely associated with The Hunter Valley this grape has not made huge inroads overseas – mainly because its principal equivalent – white Bordeaux – is a blend of Semillon and sauvignon blanc

Riesling – until 1992 when Chardonnay surpassed it – this was Australia's most important white grape. Now also produced in Tasmania there is a renaissance particularly among boutique wine producers.

Sauvignon Blanc – having eyed the success of her New Zealand cousins this formerly unrepresented grape is being seen in growing quantities, but this remains a tiny quantity. As seen in our tasting tonight though it is beginning to be used in blends with Semillon – as in Bordeaux

There is huge experimentation with a wide range of global grape varieties from Pinot Noir, Malbec and Grenache amongst the reds to Viognier, Marsdanne and Verdelho amongst the whites. It is as if having shown the world how well they have mastered the power house grapes they are now setting their sights on more niche and terroir driven wine styles.

The wines we will be drinking tonight

Jacob's Creek, Pinot Noir, Methode Traditionelle

Some pure fizz from Oz

Hen and Chicken Chardonnay, 2009 – Western Australia

From the Australian winery of the year 2011 and made by Ian Cherubino, this wine is distinctive and full of flavour. These grapes are handpicked – unusual in Australia – representing the new approach of boutique wine owners

Haan, Classic Blend Semillon Sauvignon, 2010, Barossa Valley, South Australia

From 50 year old Semillon vines (85%) and more newly planted Sauvignon Blanc (15%) planted in sandy soil over deep clay, this wine aims to blend old world complexity with new world depth of flavour

Metal Label, The White Viognier, 2001 South Australia

Another cracker from Bob Berton. Viognier is the new 'sexy' white wine from Oz where plantings are growing, albeit from a very low base, at the fastest rate for any of the whites. Excitement is also about blending it with Shiraz. This is precisely the approach in the Northern ~Rhône – cross influences come to the fore again.

The Black Shiraz, Bob Berton, 2009, South Australia

A great example of a deep, dark (hence the name) juicy wine from south east Australia

Penny's Hill, McLaren Vale Grenache, 2009 – South Australia

Another example of the new wave of taking on the old world. This area is most renowned for its Shiraz. This wine is aimed squarely at taking on a southern Rhône style of wine – with the other great grape of the Rhône.

Berton Reserve, Coonawara Reserve, 2008 – South Australia

From highly respected and progressive wine producer Bob Berton. This is a classic cabernet sauvignon from the heartland of cab sauv production on the border of South Australia and Victoria. Stored and fermented in stainless steel and then racked in French barrels

Botryis Semillon, Berton Reserve, 2009 – South Australia

100% botrytised Semillon - a delicious sweet/dessert wine