

Australian Wines

"I'm Not Dead Yet" From Monty Python

BY JON GENDERSON

Much has been written in the wine press lately about the decline of Australian wines. Certainly the collapse of the low-end wines with "critter labels" due to drought and low grape prices for growers has hurt that segment of the market. Very high-end wine sales have slowed, as have high-end sales from most wine regions around the world. However, the majority of wineries in top regions like Barossa and McLaren Vale are doing OK. Some have lowered prices to hit the price points consumers want and that has led to some really outstanding bargains for American wine consumers.

Australia is close in size to the United States and contains many vastly different wine regions. The first stop for most visitors to Australia is Sydney, so the first wine region visited tends to be the Hunter Valley, a three-hour drive west of the city. The vineyards of Hunter Valley, famous for Shiraz and Semillon, are set in gently rolling hills in a lush countryside. The Shiraz is more elegant than those from South Australia and the Semillon is truly unique. It is traditionally harvested early with high acidity in the grapes producing a full-bodied white with lots of character and complexity. The most highly regarded winery here is Brookenwood. Famous for their Semillon (\$20), ILR Reserve Semillon (\$40), and Graveyard Vineyard Shiraz (\$125), this a winery to keep on your radar.

A two-hour flight from Sidney lands you in Adelaide, the capitol of the Australian wine industry. Australia's most famous wine regions surround the city and with the exception of Coonawarra, a five-hour drive, all are close enough for comfortable day trips from Adelaide.

Heading northeast out of the city has you driving thru the Adelaide Hills Region during an easy 45 mile trip to the famous Barossa Valley. It is in this valley that ungrafted Shiraz vines over one hundred years old make grapes used in the legendary Penfolds Grange, Grant Burge Meshach, John Duval Eligo, and many other great wines. Shiraz is king in the Barossa with the queen being the lovely Rhone blends of Grenache, Shiraz and Mourvedre.

Another 40 miles north takes you to a different world, or at least a different climate in the Clare Valley. Barossa is an extremely hot wine region and the Clare Valley is one of the coolest regions in Australia. It is here that Riesling reigns, producing a bone dry wine with vibrant, bracing acidity, complex minerality and great depth of flavor. Cabernet produced in this cool climate is very different from those made in the Barossa or McLaren Vale. They are not as big, but offer a complexity akin to Cabernet produced in

Bordeaux. Shiraz here is often closer to Hermitage from the northern Rhone valley in France than to Barossa.

Just thirty minutes south of Adelaide is another famous region, McLaren Vale. This tiny town is surrounded by a host of outstanding wineries producing excellent Shiraz, Cabernet and Grenache. Warm like the Barossa, the proximity to the sea (a ten-minute drive) yields cooler nights, which lends more structure to the wines. Just south of McLaren Vale is the similar region of Fleurieu.

Located five hours southeast of Adelaide and five hours west of Melbourne are the deep red soiled vineyards of Coonawarra. Coonawarra is renowned as one of Australia's finest wine regions and is particularly known for producing world class Cabernet Sauvignon and very good Shiraz. Its secret lies in a marriage of rich red terra rossa soil, limestone and a long cool ripening season for the grapes. The Cabernet produced here is remarkably complex with a very distinctive "terroir." These wines are a must for Cabernet aficionados.

The Bargains

Black and White Shiraz 2005 McLaren Vale (\$15)

This delicious McLaren Vale Shiraz is made by a top winery that sells its primary label for \$35. At \$15, it is an amazing bargain - inky black in color with rich jammy blackberry and blueberry aromas.

Cardinham Estate Shiraz 2004 Clare Valley (\$15)

A cool climate Shiraz from the Clare Valley in South Australia, this is similar to a northern Rhone with spicy black fruits, blackberries, chocolate, and earth. This is a great value at \$25 but with the reduced price of \$15, it is a steal!

Cascabel Shiraz 2003 McLaren Vale (\$20)

This elegant wine seems more classically European than South Australian. It is a terrific, mature wine that reveals a floral nose of violets, honeysuckle, black raspberries, and cassis with extraordinary elegance and complexity as well as an opulent, multi-layered finish. It's a really good deal at \$30 and a great one at \$19.99.

Craneford Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 Barossa (\$20)

A perennial favorite at Schneider's, the Craneford Cabernet has a classy perfume of cedar, spice box, black currant and blackberry. Full-bodied, the

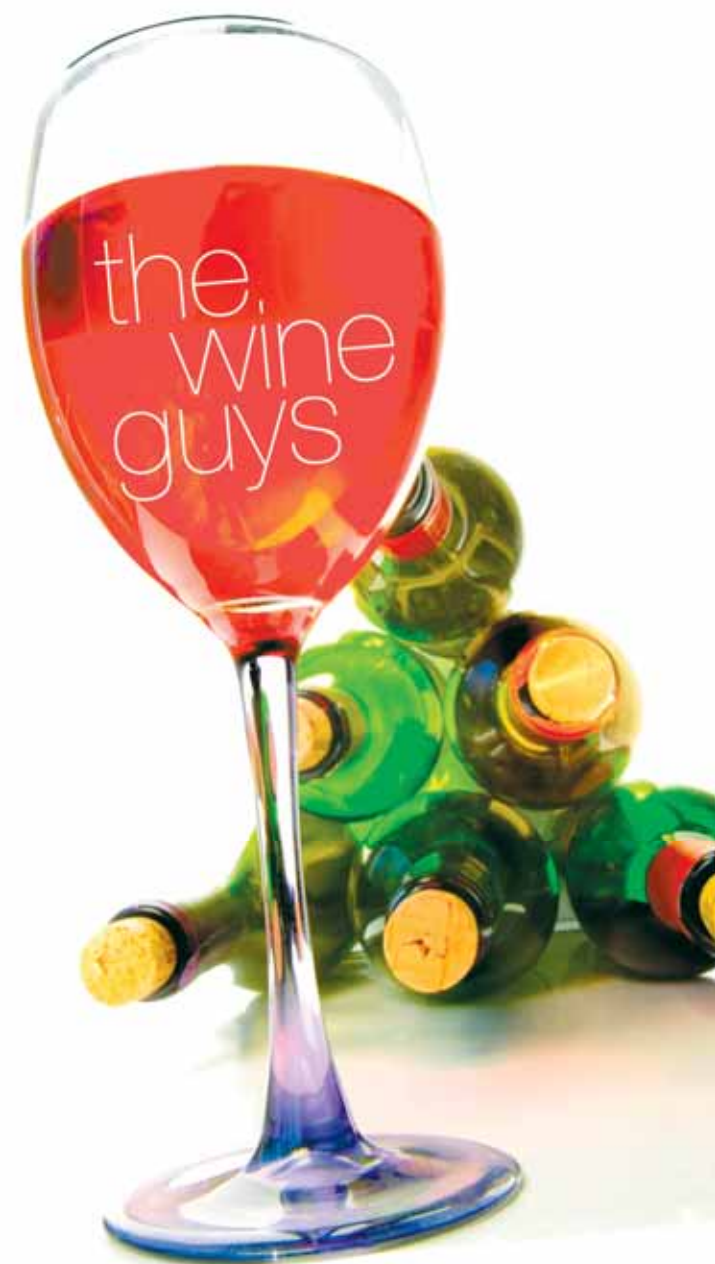
wine has gobs of spicy dark fruit flavors with mocha and chocolate. It is nicely balanced and has a long, fruity finish. The regular price is \$30.

Craneford Merlot 2005 Barossa (\$20)

A classic Merlot with bold aromas of blueberry fruit, coffee, chocolate and spice. It is big, soft and voluptuous, all at a very affordable price. Like the Cabernet, It's also regularly \$30.

D'Arenberg Olive Grove Chardonnay 2006 McLaren Vale (\$12)

Classic, oak aged Chardonnay with apple and



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pear, hints of citrus and rich, buttery flavors all wrapped up in a balanced, delightful glass of wine. It was a good deal at the regular price of \$17.

Five Geese Grenache / Shiraz 2004 Clare Valley (\$20)

The nose has mature aromas of rose petals and ripe berries. The forward fruit leads to full, red fruit flavors mixed with earth and complex oak. This \$30 gem is perfect with grilled food.

Five Geese Shiraz 2003 Clare Valley (\$20)

Here is another \$30 Shiraz selling for \$20. Lovely fruit highlights this medium-bodied, round, soft Shiraz with blackberry, plum and chocolate fruit. The smooth texture is highlighted with a light touch of vanilla oak. Delicious!

Ross Estate Shiraz Reserve 2003 Barossa (\$30)

This \$45 beauty is classic Barossa with a sweet perfume of blueberries, blackberries, charcoal, and pepper. Full-bodied, dense and chewy, with low acidity, ripe fruit and a layered texture of complex flavors, you can't do any better at this reduced price.

Tempus Two Vine Vale Shiraz 2005 McLaren Vale (\$15)

A great deal in Shiraz! It is dark ruby in color with an aromatic array of smoke, spice box, black cherry, and blueberry. Made in an elegant style, the wine has a solid core of fruit, forward, pleasant flavors, and a pure finish. It was a value at \$25.

Zema Estate Cabernet 2004 Coonawarra (\$20)

I thought this was a great wine at \$30 a bottle. Zema Estate Cabernet Sauvignon is a benchmark Coonawarra Cabernet, concentrated with rich blackberry and mint fruit further enhanced with well integrated oak. A well structured and balanced wine that is true joy to drink now, it will continue to age gracefully for another couple of years. ★

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