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HIGHS AND LOWS DOWN UNDER

Australian wines bounce back in 2012

with newfound diversity and sophistication

By Harvey Steiman

Vintage typically plays a secondary role in Australian wine. Since most years are good enough to produce high-performing bottlings, region, grape type and producer more often determine whether a wine is worthy of attention. Midway through this decade, however, the ups and downs of recent years have had a huge effect on quality—and on the wines' individuality.

Gary Mills of Jamsheed specializes in crisp, precise Shiraz in cool-climate Victoria. After the 2014 vintage threw him a curveball, he concluded, "We haven't had a nontricky season in some time, so maybe this is becoming the norm."

He's not alone in his concern. Michael Twelftree, whose Barossa-based Two Hands produces wines from across South Australia and parts of Victoria, says, "For mine, 2012 and 2014 are classic, 2013 and 2015 ripened a little too quick for me, and if you made good wine in 2011 you're very good at what you do."

It's too early to tell if 2014 will be as impressive as Twelftree expects. Of the more than 625 wines reviewed in Wine Spectator since my previous report ("Cabernet on the Rise," Aug. 31, 2014), only about 90 are from that vintage and most are on the value end of the spectrum. But 2012 is a clear standout in our recent reviews, with wines comparable in excellence to the outstanding 2010s.

A stunning 50 percent of the nearly 200 wines from 2012 in this report—which includes a significant number of higher-priced, more ambitious bottlings—earned outstanding ratings of 90 or more points on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale. Counting previous annual reports, 38 percent of the 2012s reach the 90-point level, including seven with classic ratings of 95 points or higher.

The big letdown for most of Australia is 2011, reflected in a substantial dip in the number of wines from that vintage exported to the United States. Counting all wines tasted for the past several reports, barely 400 came from 2011, about one-third less than surrounding vintages.



Bernard Hickin, chief winemaker for Jacob's Creek in Barossa, says the U.S. won't see any of the winery's reserve releases from 2011. "As you know, 2011 was a wet and very challenging vintage across the region, and at Jacob's Creek smaller volumes were produced across the board. We moved straight from 2010 to 2012."

Some vintners simply balked at bottling or shipping 2011s to the U.S., among them Henschke, one of Australia's iconic producers, whose late-release Hill of Grace Vineyard Eden Valley 2009 (98, \$725) is the top wine of this report, along with Penfolds Shiraz South Australia Grange 2010 (98, \$850). Proprietor Stephen Henschke says, "Yields were low in 2011, quality was variable and didn't justify exporting in most cases."

Matt Fowles, the Victoria-based proprietor of Fowles, Are You Game and Ladies Who Shoot Their Lunch, released no reds from 2011. "The 2011s need to be carefully sorted out," he says. "For those lucky enough to have Mother Nature cut them a break, the good red wines from 2011 are restrained, elegant and expressive of region. They are just a little difficult to find."

In the past year, 35 percent of the 2011s broke the 90-point barrier. Examples include the distinctly peppery Domaine Terlato & Chapoutier Shiraz Pyrenees L-Block 2011 (93 points, \$60), with a strong mineral streak running through dark berry flavors; the sinewy Giaconda Shiraz Victoria Warner Vineyard 2011 (93, \$111), which focuses its plum and mineral flavors on a taut frame, showing presence and equilibrium; and the Nine Stones Shiraz Hilltops 2011 (91, \$13), made in the high-elevation Canberra region.

Comparing outstanding wines from 2011 and 2012 suggests that Shiraz and blends did better in the sunshine and warmth of 2012. Typically harvested earlier, white wines produced more consistent quality in 2011, but these were mostly reviewed in previous reports.

The top 2012s are luxury labels, including three opulent Shiraz bottlings from Two Hands. The Two Hands Shiraz Eden Valley-Barossa Yacca Block Single Vineyard Menglers Hill 2012 (96, \$120) has a broad-shouldered frame, allowing glimmers of transparency to show through a dense thicket of cherry and raspberry flavors. All the pieces are in place for this wine to age magnificently. (The vineyard was established by Bob McLean when he left St. Hallett; his death in March left a gaping hole in the Barossa firmament.)

Another head-turner is the Penfolds Cabernet Sauvignon South Australia Bin 707 2012 (95, \$350), vibrant, focused and elegant, exhibiting currant, blackberry, potpourri and spice flavors.

An impressive number of majestic wines at 92 to 94 points and priced at \$50 or less provide a pretty good tour of what Australia is doing well these days. Balnaves' focused and expressive Cabernet-Merlot Coonawarra 2012 (93, \$33) layers red berry, black plum, licorice and pumpkin pie spice notes with finesse and density, marking the return of the Coonawarra-based estate after an absence of several years from the U.S. market.



Among Shirazes, St. Hallett's Shiraz Barossa Blackwell 2012 (92, \$39) has depth and impressive persistence, with juicy black cherry, dark plum and roasted meat flavors. **John Duval's Shiraz Barossa Entity 2012 (92, \$40) is fresh and vital, expressing its dark plum and spice flavors on an open texture. Kilikanoon's polished Shiraz Clare Valley Covenant 2012 (93, \$40) layers blackberry, dark plum, floral and clove flavors onto an open-textured frame.** And Tournon's Shiraz Heathcote Lady's Lane Vineyard 2012 (92, \$50), from Michel Chapoutier, offers signature cool-climate pepper notes with its blackberry and tomato leaf character.

Grenache and Grenache-based blends also yield standouts in 2012, including several deft and precise versions from Twelftree Wines, the namesake brand of Two Hands owner Michael Twelftree. Sleek and supple, the Twelftree Grenache Barossa Valley Sturt Ebenezer 2012 (93, \$40) weaves cinnamon and clove notes through lingonberry, raspberry and cherry flavors, with a long finish providing some delicacy. The polished style of the Twelftree Grenache-Mataro Barossa Valley Greenock-Ebenezer 2012 (93, \$40) shows ripe Montmorency cherry and dark plum flavors on a near-weightless frame.

On the value side, Dandelion's Grenache, Shiraz and Mataro blend, Menagerie of the Barossa 2012 (91, \$20), delivers juicy red berry and red plum flavors in a velvety package. The Willunga 100 Grenache McLaren Vale 2011 (91, \$20) is another silk purse from 2011, lithe, supple and appealing for its blueberry, white pepper and floral flavors. And Yalumba's always-reliable Grenache Barossa Old Bush Vine (90, \$19) hints at tangerine and pear notes around lively berry and spice flavors, all set on a sleek frame; it's one of the standout values from 2013.

Across the continent, in Western Australia, where Margaret River is the marquee appellation, 2011 was a great vintage all around. Among the top bottlings is this report's highest-rated white wine, the Leeuwin Chardonnay Margaret River Art Series 2011 (96, \$89), the No. 5 wine in last year's Top 100. The follow-up vintage, 2012 (94, \$89), is amazingly focused and deft, pulling all its elements together into a cohesive whole and lingering with precision.

Twelve other Margaret River Chardonnays take their place among the 56 whites from various vintages to exceed 90 points. Among them are Larry Cherubino's Chardonnay Margaret River 2012 (92, \$36), satiny smooth and effusively flavorful, and Voyager Estate's Chardonnay Margaret River 2010 (92, \$48), another brand missing from U.S. shelves for several vintages. Rich in texture, its pineapple, pear and floral flavors finish with finesse and lemony intensity. Yarra Valley stalwart Giant Steps continues to impress with its Chardonnay Yarra Valley Sexton Vineyard 2013 (92, \$42), a lacy, tangy style, with floral, mint and tea flavors.

Riesling, made in Australia's signature dry and steely style that benefits from five to 10 years of cellaring, excels with such wines as the Grosset Riesling Clare Valley Springvale 2014 (93, \$42), light-footed but explosive, with flavors of pear, honeysuckle, apple and cinnamon, and Kilikanoon Riesling Clare Valley Mort's Block 2013 (92, \$20), floating pear, peach and citrus flavors on a refined texture.



Amid all this vintage variation, the landscape is changing for Australian wine in the United States. We are seeing more imports from cool-climate regions such as Yarra Valley, Victoria, Western Australia, Adelaide Hills and Limestone Coast, and fewer big-boned, high-octane reds from sunny Barossa, Clare and McLaren Vale.

Tasmania, for example, is producing Pinot Noirs such as Josef Chromy's lithe Pinot Noir Pepik 2012 (92, \$30), with inviting wild strawberry, tea leaf and spice flavors, and Dalrymple's supple Pinot Noir Pipers River 2013 (91, \$35), appealing for its blueberry, currant and dusky spice flavors.

Gavin Speight of Old Bridge Cellars sees a generation of winemakers broadening their horizons. "There's been a massive influx in imports [in Australia], and these young winemakers have the ability to taste wines they couldn't get their hands on before," he notes. "Australian winemakers are so used to having a domestic market to drink up their wines. They're often surprised to come [to the U.S.] and realize they're competing against wines from everywhere."

Among Old Bridge's imports are the John Duval Plexus Red Barossa Valley 2012 (91, \$40), a blend of Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvèdre that has transparency to its plum and black currant fruit, and Yeringberg Chardonnay Yarra Valley 2013 (91, \$35), which is light and tangy, with pineapple, pear and floral flavors.

One glimpse at the most recent wave of Aussie wines comes from Adam Foster, a former Michelin-starred chef with no formal wine training who set up shop in central Victoria. Compact, focused and beautifully knit, the Syrahmi Shiraz Heathcote Demi 2013 (93, \$35) offers expressive blackberry, plum and tangerine fruit.

Australian wine continues to evolve, thanks to new blood and the quality fluctuations of recent vintages. The options coming from the country are widening, and the wine world is richer for it.

POINTS SNAPSHOT:

BROKENWOOD

Pinot Noir Beechworth 2014	88
Pinot Noir Beechworth 2013	88
Sémillon Hunter Valley ILR Reserve Vineyard Selection 2009	88
Sémillon Hunter Valley Oakey Creek Vineyard Selection 2009	90
Sémillon Hunter Valley Oakey Creek Vineyard Selection 2008	91
Shiraz Australia 2012	89



CULLEN

Chardonnay Margaret River Kevin John 2012	94
Diana Madeline Margaret River 2012	91

d'ARENBERG

Riesling McLaren Vale The Dry Dam 2014	91
Riesling McLaren Vale The Dry Dam 2013	90
Roussanne McLaren Vale The Money Spider 2012	89
Viognier-Marsanne McLaren Vale The Hermit Crab 2013	89

JOHN DUVAL

Plexus Red Barossa Valley 2012	91
Plexus White Barossa Valley 2013	89
Shiraz Barossa Entity 2012	92

GIANT STEPS

Chardonnay Yarra Valley Sexton Vineyard 2013	92
Chardonnay Yarra Valley Tarraford Vineyard 2013	90
Pinot Noir Yarra Valley Applejack Vineyard 2013	91
Pinot Noir Yarra Valley Sexton Vineyard 2013	91

INNOCENT BYSTANDER

Pinot Noir Yarra Valley 2013	89
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KILIKANOON

Cabernet Sauvignon Clare Valley Killerman's Run 2012	89
Riesling Clare Valley Mort's Block 2013	92
Riesling Clare Valley Mort's Reserve 2013	92
Shiraz Clare Valley Covenant 2012	93
Shiraz Clare Valley Killerman's Run 2012	90

LEEUWIN

Cabernet Sauvignon Margaret River Art Series 2010	89
Chardonnay Margaret River Art Series 2012	94
Chardonnay Margaret River Art Series 2011	96
Chardonnay Margaret River Prelude Vineyards 2013	91
Chardonnay Margaret River Prelude Vineyards 2012	91
Riesling Margaret River Art Series 2014	88
Shiraz Margaret River Art Series 2011	90
Shiraz Margaret River Siblings 2012	90



PENLEY

Cabernet Sauvignon Coonawarra Reserve 2012	89
Chardonnay Coonawarra Aradia 2013	89
Chertsey Coonawarra 2012	89
Shiraz-Cabernet Coonawarra Condor 2012	88

PLANTAGENET

Cabernet Sauvignon Great Southern 2012	90
Chardonnay Great Southern 2013	89
Riesling Great Southern 2013	88
Shiraz Great Southern 2012	88
Shiraz Western Australia Hazard Hill 2012	87

SHOOFLY

Pinot Noir Victoria 2014	87
Shiraz South Australia 2013	88

YARRA YERING

Dry Red No. 1 Yarra Valley 2010	89
Dry Red No. 2 Yarra Valley 2010	94
Shiraz Yarra Valley Underhill 2010	91

YERINGBERG

Chardonnay Yarra Valley 2013	91
Marsanne-Roussanne Yarra Valley 2013	88
Shiraz Yarra Valley 2012	92
Viognier Yarra Valley 2013	90

