

Making Waves

By MaryAnn Worobiec
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Australian vintners navigate a changing marketplace with a wide range of distinctive wines



From left: Penley owner Ang Tolley, winemaker Kate Goodman and owner Bec Tolley. The winery released an outstanding Cabernet from Coonawarra.

Quality, consistency, value and diversity continue to be the hallmarks of Australian wine, but the country's producers still face the challenge of getting this message out. Even though Aussie winemakers have hit their stride, turning out exciting wines vintage after vintage, they struggle to get the attention of wine lovers in the United States.

Winemaker Reid Bosward of Kaesler Wines in the Barossa Valley describes the surprise he frequently encounters when he brings his wines stateside. "If I had a dollar for every time someone said, 'I didn't expect your wine to taste like that!'" he says, emphasizing how many more versions there are to discover Down Under. "You just have to come here and open bottles."

My blind tastings over the past year bear this out. Of the nearly 550 Aussie wines I have reviewed since our previous report ("[Continental Drift](#)," July 31, 2018), a third scored 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, an impressive percentage reflective of the country's consistency over recent vintages. Yet the wines in the top tier have undergone an evolution, offering greater diversity than ever before. About half of the bottlings rated 93 points or higher are Shiraz, but the remainder includes a diverse selection that ranges from intense Hunter Valley Sémillon to supple Margaret River Chardonnay to elegant Yarra Valley Pinot Noir to precise McLaren Vale Cabernet Sauvignon.

This is a reminder that it's not the wines themselves that have become cliché, but the term "Australian wine." Australia is a vast place, comprising roughly the same landmass as the United States, with more than 60 winegrowing regions and more than a dozen grape varieties worth mentioning. Yet no one uses the term "American wine" as they do "Australian wine"—it's not informative or descriptive enough. Wine lovers still don't have a clear understanding of Coonawarra Cabernet or Tasmanian Chardonnay the way they do Napa Cabernet and Willamette Valley Pinot Noir—terms that indicate not only a style but also a commitment to quality. But perhaps, as Bosward suggests, the key simply lies in opening more bottles.

It's still fair to consider Shiraz the star of Australia. It represents about 30 percent of the grapes grown, 30 percent of the wines exported and a third of the wines in this report. The top-scorers include Penfolds, Henschke, Hentley Farm, Mollydooker, Two Hands and Torbreck—all brands that have solidified their place not only among the top Shirazes from Australia, but also among the best examples from around the world.

In terms of style, there continue to be plenty of rich, bold versions, along with more nuanced expressions, as winemakers have been dialing back on ripeness and oak and fine-tuning their growing practices. One of the most memorable bottlings this year is the stylish and aromatic Torbreck Shiraz Barossa Valley Woodcutter's 2017 (93 points, \$25), a blend from dozens of growers in the Barossa, sourced from five different soil types. It's also a great example of Aussie Shiraz overdelivering on quality for the price.

"The wines are really fresh and bright from this season, so we tried not to dominate the prettier characteristics with heavier oak handling," explains Torbreck winemaker Ian Hongell, who describes 2017 as a cool harvest. Hongell kept about a quarter of the wine in stainless-steel tanks to preserve the fruit flavors, while the rest matured in large-format seasoned oak barrels.

I've been seeing these types of deliberate choices—using larger barrels, applying a lighter oak touch, maintaining a sense of freshness—from a range of producers, and not just for Shiraz. The Barossa is among the country's warmer growing regions, yielding a riper style of Shiraz, with more black fruit, but areas such as Eden Valley, Victoria and McLaren Vale more naturally lend themselves to other characteristics. A subset of producers use the term Syrah to indicate a more elegant style, with some of the best examples coming from Victoria's Yarra Valley, such as the Giant Steps Syrah Yarra Valley Tarraford Vineyard 2017 (92, \$42) and Jamsheed Syrah Yarra Valley Nouveau 2017 (92, \$25).

Likewise, the top-scoring Cabernet Sauvignons in this report also reveal a more distinctive sense of style, regionality or both. Showing off a rich and flashy expression of Cabernet that would be a welcome addition to any collector's cellar, the Penfolds South Australia Bin 707 (95, \$500) is a multi-region blend of grapes from Coonawarra, McLaren Vale, Barossa and Adelaide Hills, aged 20 months in new American oak barrels.

From McLaren Vale, Hickinbotham's vibrant Cabernet Sauvignon Trueman 2016 (94, \$75) demonstrates the pure and juicy fruit flavors you'd expect from the region, while Penley shows off Coonawarra's density in two Cabernet-based bottlings: the Cabernet Sauvignon-Shiraz Coonawarra Eos 2016 (93, \$100) and Cabernet Sauvignon Coonawarra Steyning 2015 (93, \$50). These are Cabernets that can stand up to versions from anywhere else in the world. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

Even having seen the trend toward fresher expressions and greater transparency, I was surprised to crunch the numbers and find that 46% of the wines I reviewed this year clocked in at alcohol levels of 13.5% or lower. Some of these wines include reds from cooler-climate regions such as Yarra Valley, Margaret River and Tasmania, while others are whites that lend themselves to a lighter profile, including Sémillon, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc.

There is also excitement among vintners exploring further off the beaten path, trying out less-familiar grape varieties such as Assyrtiko, Cinsault, Fiano, Graciano, Mataro and Verdelho. This is similar to what's happening in other regions across the world: As climate change looms and young winemakers enter the field with new ideas, established producers begin to experiment as well and a deeper understanding emerges of the country's varied *terroirs*.

Australia's export market is evolving as well. Now 63% of Australian wine is exported—primarily to China, where its value has exploded in the past decade, from \$73 million to nearly \$900 million worth of wine. Free trade agreements and stimulus packages have smoothed this trajectory, and Australia is now poised to overtake France as China's biggest source for imported wines. Meanwhile the volume of wine imported into the U.S. has declined slightly, though the trend lines are toward U.S. wine lovers buying more Aussie wines at \$20 and up.

The biggest sales phenomenon of late is 19 Crimes, a brand by Treasury Wine Estates, which saw a 51% boost in the U.S. over the past year to 1.56 million cases. That equates to nearly an 11% share of the total Australian category in the U.S. after only five years in the market, according to Michelle Terry, global chief marketing officer for Treasury. "It's been an amazing success for us," says Terry.

19 Crimes is the second most-sold Australian brand in the U.S. behind Yellow Tail, which might make some Aussie winemakers nervous. Some believe that Yellow Tail's success hurt Australia's reputation stateside by associating the continent with simple wines that were cheap and cheerful. But 19 Crimes averages a price tag about double that of Yellow Tail—and the brand has devised innovative ways to market itself. The stories on the wine labels are true tales of prisoners sent to Australia, both heroic and nefarious; the frosted bottle has a different look and feel; and an augmented-reality app can bring the labels to life on your phone.

"It talks to millennials," says Terry, who adds that the storytelling behind the brand also has appeal across generations. The lineup includes seven different bottlings, including the plump and juicy Cabernet Sauvignon South Eastern Australia 2017 (86, \$15). The success of 19 Crimes suggests that warmer regions and bigger styles still have a place for wine lovers reaching for Aussie wine in supermarkets—and that they are willing to trade up to higher prices.

But Matt Fowles also reports that his Farm to Table wines have been a huge success after being rolled out in 40 Whole Foods stores across the country. The lineup includes the Sauvignon Blanc Victoria 2018 (89, \$17), Chardonnay Victoria 2017 (88, \$17) and Pinot Noir Victoria 2018 (88, \$16), all of them sharing a fresh, vivid profile. "Our sales represented nearly 19 percent of all Australian wine sales for Whole Foods nationally," says Fowles. "I think that is remarkable for a little, cool-climate Victorian winery."

Fowles doesn't think his success is a fluke. "Globally, I am finding consumer preferences to lighter, more food-friendly styles that we see in the Strathbogie Ranges," he says. "In the same way people are eating lighter, we are seeing them drink lighter, which I think is part of a broader consumption trend." He jokes about the implications: "We are even dressing lighter with the explosion of yoga pants and activewear. Is Farm to Table the yoga pants of wine?"

The success of 19 Crimes and Farm to Table is only part of the story. Australian wines have many high points, whether you break them down by region, grape variety or style. With 80% of the wines in this year's report bottled under screwcap, there's also more bottle consistency than ever before.

Whether you're looking for a crisp Riesling, a benchmark Viognier, a savory Cabernet, a classic Shiraz, a cool-climate Pinot Noir or even the wine equivalent of yoga pants, Australia has it all. It's a good moment to open some bottles and experience the continent's transformation into a worldwide force of wine.

Senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Australia.

MARYANN WOROBIEC'S RECOMMENDED WINES FROM AUSTRALIA

93 pts 2015 Coonawarra Steyning Cabernet Sauvignon

Generous, offering a dash of framboise to the plush cherry and raspberry core, with accents of vanilla bean, rosemary, mocha and loam.

95 pts Leeuwin 2015 Art Series Chardonnay

Supple and creamy up front, with precise nutmeg, lemon curd, verbena and mandarin orange flavors, which are intense and harmonious. Offers an elegant body and lingering accents of ginger and citrus zest.

93 pts 2011 Brokenwood Hunter Valley Oakey Creek Vineyard Selection

Brimming with personality, this offers a whiff of smoke and lanolin that melts away into lemon curd, spice and saline flavors.

93 pts 2017 Giant Steps Applejack Vineyard Pinot Noir

This vivid red offers elegant white pepper, fresh earth and green tomato leaf notes that mingle with blueberry and raspberry flavors.

93 pts 2016 John Duval Plexus Red

Harmonious, with supple tannins and a heavy mocha accent, smoothing out the core of blueberry and blackberry flavors. Shiraz blend.

89 pts 2017 d'Arenberg The Hermit Crab Viognier-Marsanne

A crisp, mouthwatering white, with refreshing peach, melon and tangerine flavors. A note of lanolin lingers. Viognier and Marsanne.

87 pts Frisk Prickly Riesling

Notes of lime sherbet, apricot and honeysuckle are aromatic, juicy and appealing in this white.