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## REASONS TO DRINK AUSTRALIAN

*It's time to give Australia's  
unique wines another look.*

BY JOE CZERWINSKI

Finding great Australian wine in the U.S. is harder than it used to be.

Hurt by sagging demand and unfavorable exchange rates following the global financial crisis, imports have yet to return to pre-2008 levels. Many producers cut allocations, while others exited the market.

Fortunately, things have started to turn around, at least in terms of selection and value. Enterprising importers have joined the field, bringing in new brands and reintroducing others, while established importers see rediscovered vitality.

It may still be tough to locate Down Under's best bottles, but here are 10 compelling reasons to try.



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## Balanced, Elegant Cabernets

In contrast to the U.S., where Cabernet Sauvignon has long been the "big red" of the wine world, Australian Cabernet has always been the finesse-filled counterbalance to tough-guy Shiraz. Grown in cooler, more maritime climates than typical for Shiraz, these Cabernets can show a bit of restraint or austerity, as the model has always looked to Bordeaux for inspiration.

Top Geographical Indications (GIs) include Margaret River in Western Australia, where pioneering horticulturist John Gladstone and California legend Robert Mondavi agreed that the Bordeaux-like climate would grow good Cabernet Sauvignon. Cooled by the confluence of the Great Southern and Indian oceans, it's probably surpassed Coonawarra in terms of renown.

Coonawarra remains no slouch, producing refined wines from its famous terra rossa soils underlain by limestone.

Also in South Australia, Clare Valley is an underrated source of Cabernet Sauvignon. The wines typically lack the bombast of Barossa versions, offering silky tannins and herbal underpinnings.

Try: Cape Mentelle (Margaret River), **Cullen (Margaret River)**, Jim Barry (Clare Valley, Coonawarra), **Kilikanoon (Clare Valley)**, Moss Wood (Margaret River), **Penley Estate (Coonawarra)**, Robert Oatley (Margaret River), Vasse Felix (Margaret River), Wakefield Estate (Clare Valley), Wynns Coonawarra Estate, Yalumba Menzies (Coonawarra)



## Hipster Tasmania

The coolest wines in Australia right now are those coming from the island of Tasmania, off Victoria's southern coast.

Originally planted with the production of *méthode Champenoise* in mind (Champagne Louis Roederer was once a leading vineyard owner), those wines continue to sparkle. Jansz, owned by Robert Hill Smith of Yalumba, is the most consistently available in the United States.

The island is ideally suited to Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Riesling. Penfolds's top Chardonnay, Yattarna, is now sourced almost exclusively from Tasmania. Dalrymple and Glaetzer-Dixon are other producers worth pursuing.

More surprising are the plaudits now being showered on other varieties. Domaine A makes a Cabernet Sauvignon that consistently rates in the mid-90s, according to Australian wine critic James Halliday. Meanwhile, a Shiraz from Glaetzer-Dixon won the 2011 Jimmy Watson Memorial Trophy, awarded at the Melbourne Wine Show to the best young Australian red wine.

The only catch is that so many of the Tasmanian wines are difficult to find outside of Australia. Which just makes them that much cooler....

Try: Clover Hill (sparkling), Dalrymple (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir), Glaetzer-Dixon (Pinot Noir, Riesling), Jansz (sparkling), Penfolds (Yattarna Chardonnay)





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## World-Class Chardonnays

Of Australia's myriad wines, Chardonnay may be the one that's gone through the largest stylistic swings.

For years, it was big and buttery, tropical in profile and lavished with oak. More recently, it got leaner, crisper and more restrained. Winemakers were seeking elegance and what many referred to as "finesse."

Some producers took that pursuit too far, and their wines came across as shrill, tart and underripe, lacking the sunny fruit and friendly nature of their predecessors. Today, the country's best producers strike an elegant balance between the extremes, crafting wines that are approachable young, but can age up to 10 years or so (especially under screw cap).

The best of these come from some of Australia's coolest growing regions

Margaret River is a standout, as are the Adelaide Hills, Mornington Peninsula, Tasmania and Yarra Valley, but other parts of the country can also deliver the goods. Don't discount Padthaway, Eden Valley or even parts of Clare.

Try: **Cullen (Margaret River)**, Eldridge Estate (Mornington Peninsula), Frankland Estate (Frankland River), Giaconda (Victoria), **Giant Steps (Yarra Valley)**, Leeuwin Estate (Margaret River), Moorooduc (Mornington Peninsula), Nugan Estate (King Valley), Penfolds (multiple regions), Petaluma (Adelaide Hills), **Plantagenet (Mount Barker)**, Shaw and Smith (Adelaide Hills), Stella Bella (Margaret River), Stonier (Mornington Peninsula), Tapanappa (Adelaide Hills), Vasse Felix (Margaret River)



## Battery-Acid Beauties

Take a warm, wet growing region, and produce some of the leanest, greenest white wines you'll ever come across? Exactly.

Late summer heat and humidity is a recipe for disaster in most grape-growing regions, but Hunter Valley winemakers have made a virtue of their iffy climate for decades. By picking their Semillon grapes early, before the worst of the weather hits, they avoid rot and high sugar levels while preserving high acidity.

As young wines, the results aren't always pleasant. At various times, they've been compared to battery acid and lemon juice. Virtually the only way to enjoy them is alongside oysters or clams on the half shell, where they work very well.

Only after proper cellaring do these wines truly come into their own—anywhere from 5–20 years after the vintage, depending on the year and producer. Through some trick of chemistry, the wines broaden on the palate, adding layers of toasty richness without oak influence and hints of orange marmalade. It's a caterpillar-to-butterfly metamorphosis almost unique in the wine world.

Try: **Brokenwood**, De Lullis, Thomas



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## Versatile Dry Rieslings

Riesling is the world's greatest cool-climate grape. So why include it in an article on Australian wines?

Despite the challenges of climate, Australian Rieslings are underappreciated and undervalued.

With the exception of a few, not widely exported versions that retain some sugar, these are bone-dry, crisply acidic wines that are powerful in their youth and mellow with bottle age. Picked early in the season, they often appear a touch green in the glass, filled with mouth-puckering lemon and lime flavors.

When young, pair these wines with raw shellfish, crudos, ceviches and other simple seafood dishes. Once the wines broaden out with age and acquire their characteristic toasty patina of flavors—anywhere from 5–10 years after the vintage—they'll easily match richer preparations, like sauced fish or chicken.

The Eden and Clare Valleys are classic sources, but Riesling can be grown successfully in Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia.

**Try:** Alkoomi (Frankland River), Best's Great Western (Great Western), Frankland Estate (Frankland River), Grosset (Clare Valley), Jacob's Creek Steingarten (Eden Valley), Jim Barry (Clare Valley), Kilikanoon (Clare Valley), Leasingham (Clare Valley), Mesh (Eden Valley), Penfolds (Eden Valley), Petaluma (Clare Valley), Pewsey Vale (Eden Valley), Pikes (Clare Valley), Robert Oatley (Great Southern), Thorn-Clarke (Eden Valley), Wakefield Estate (Clare Valley)

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## Middle-Class Values

Falling somewhere between the floor-stacked bargain offerings and the locked-cellar rarities, this is where Australia's real treasures are waiting to be found.

Compare the quality levels of Californian or French wines retailing for \$16–50 to their Australian counterparts, and I'm firmly convinced that the Aussies will win most of these matchups. They've got climate and viticulture easily equal to California, and winemaking education that's second to none.

Despite lingering concerns about exchange rates, which can severely impact producer and importer margins, this is the part of the market seeing the highest growth, according to Wine Australia, the industry's trade organization.

If you're looking for a \$20 or \$30 Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon or Shiraz, turn to Australia without hesitation. Pinot Noir? Well, you might need to pay a little more.

**Chardonnay:** Giant Steps, Heggies Vineyard, Petaluma, Plantagenet, Robert Oatley, Stella Bella, Vasse Felix

**Cabernet Sauvignon:** Angove, Henry's Drive Vignerons, Kilikanoon, Penfolds, Penley Estate, Peter Lehmann

**Shiraz/Blends:** Chapel Hill, D'Arenberg, Domaine Tertato & Chapoutier, Earthworks, Glatzer, Henry's Drive Vignerons, Langmeil, Kaesler, Kilikanoon, Penfolds, Torbreck, Winner's Tank, Wolf Blass, Yalumba







## Old-Vine Glories

Although grapevines were on some of the first ships carrying colonists from Europe to Australia, the best-documented vines arrived in 1832 with Scottish-born James Busby.

As the devastating vine pest phylloxera wasn't introduced to Europe from America until approximately 1860, Australian vines and vineyards were originally phylloxera free. Today, even though phylloxera is present in some parts of Victoria and New South Wales, much of the country remains free of the pest.

As a result, Australia is home to some of the world's oldest grapevines. These ancient vines, planted on their own roots, are a unique vinous resource. And in many cases, their fruit is turned into profound wines.

In the Barossa Valley, Langmeil's The Freedom 1843 Shiraz is named for the year the vineyard was planted, so those vines are now 171 years old.

Hewitson's Old Garden Mourvèdre dates to 1853—the vineyard was known as the Old Garden as early as the 1880s. The oldest Shiraz vines in Henschke's Hill of Grace vineyard were planted in the 1860s. Penfolds claims its Block 42 Kalimna Cabernet Sauvignon dates from 1885.

Australia's earliest vineyards were planted close to Sydney, so the Hunter Valley also has a number of vineyards that have seen more than 100 harvests.

**Try:** Henschke Hill of Grace Shiraz, Hewitson Old Garden Mourvèdre, Kaesler Alte Reben and Old Bastard Shiraz, Langmeil The Freedom 1843 Shiraz, Penfolds Block 42 Cabernet Sauvignon, Torbreck RunRig Shiraz-Vioigner, Yalumba Tri-Centenary Grenache, Yangarra Old Vine Grenache



## Innovative Thinking

While a retailer's selection of entry-level wines won't give any indication of it, Australian wineries are actively

pursuing new grape varieties and winemaking techniques. Innocent Bystander, for example, was making a sweet sparkling rosé from Muscat grapes long before "Moscato" started showing up in hip-hop lyrics.

The first vines brought to Australia were French, but in recent years, more and more varieties have come through the country's arduous quarantine process. The major Port varieties are all present, as is Tempranillo, Sangiovese, Nebbiolo and several southern Italian varieties also show promise.

Like the country's unique grape varieties, Italian techniques are finding a home in Australia. For years, Mitolo's Serpico Cabernet Sauvignon has been made using partially dried fruit, as in Amarone. Nugan Estate has just launched a Dried Grape Shiraz (Amarone-style) and Second Pass Shiraz (Ripasso-style) in the United States, so it should be easier for consumers interested in these methods to find the wines.

Finally, pet-nat (*pétillant-naturel*), "orange" (extended skin-contact whites) and other "natural" wines have taken hold as well.

**Try:** D'Arenberg (Sticks & Stones), Gemtree (Savignin, Tempranillo), Hugh Hamilton (Saperavi, Tempranillo), Jauma (natural, pet-nat), Mitolo Serpico (Amarone-style), Nugan Estate Alfredo (Amarone- and Ripasso-style), Robert Oatley (Sangiovese Rosé), Running with Bulls (Tempranillo), S.C. Pannell (Nebbiolo, Tempranillo-Touriga), Sutton Grange (natural, orange, pet-nat), West Cape Howe (Tempranillo), Yalumba (Sangiovese Rosé), Yarra Yering (Potsorts), Zonte's Footstep (Sangiovese-Barbera, Savagnin, Verdelho)





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## Special Stickies

While they're sometimes compared to Madeira, the sweet, fortified wines labeled Rutherglen Muscat or Rutherglen Tokay (Muscadelle), are uniquely Australian.

Muscat or Muscadelle grapes are picked at high sugar levels, partially fermented and then fortified with brandy, just like many other styles of fortified wines. This is where the process starts to diverge.

The wines age in tin sheds without any climate control in old wooden casks of varying sizes—sometimes for 100 years or more. Producers transfer wines between vessels and move them around within the shed to manage the aging process before blending them into finished wines graded into four categories.

In ascending order of average age, complexity and cost, the wines are classified as Rutherglen (average age 3–5 years), Classic (6–10 years), Grand (11–19 years) and Rare (20-plus years).

Because of the extended barrel time, these nonvintage wines don't evolve much after bottling and keep well (up to a week, refrigerated) even after being opened. They're unctuous, sweet and linger forever on the finish. Serve them with desserts or strong cheeses.

**Try:** Campbells, Chambers Rosewood, Morris, R.L. Buller & Son, Seppeltsfield

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## Surprising Shiraz

Aussie Shiraz has gotten a bad rap. Even the big, bold versions from the South Australian regions of Barossa and McLaren Vale aren't the simple fruit bombs they're sometimes made out to be. Winemakers have been emphasizing elegance over size, and turning to different regions to achieve it.

The higher elevations and cooler nighttime temperatures in upland portions of Victoria yield Shiraz with higher levels of natural acids and rotundone—the chemical compound that gives Syrah its characteristic peppery notes. Look for the geographical indications (GIs) of Beechworth, Grampians, Heathcote and Pyrenees.

Altitude is also behind the success of Shiraz in the Adelaide Hills. In New South Wales, the Canberra District and Orange are other GIs worth checking out, for the same reason.

Maritime influences moderate the temperatures in Western Australia and coastal regions of Victoria, like the Yarra Valley, and South Australia, along the Limestone Coast. Shiraz from these areas is often less weighty and more nuanced than the Australian Shiraz stereotype would suggest.

**Try:** Clonakilla (Canberra District), De Bortoli (Yarra Valley), Domaine Terlatto & Chapoutier (Pyrenees), Giaconda (Beechworth), Henry's Drive Vignerons (Padthaway), Jasper Hill (Heathcote), Phillip Shaw (Orange), Shaw and Smith (Adelaide Hills), Yarra Yering (Yarra Valley), Yering Station (Yarra Valley)

