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Western Australia: Fine & Sunny. Again.
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One of the easiest jobs in the world must be that of a weather forecaster during the summer season in Perth. Still, you'd get a little bored of saying, "The outlook for today is fine and sunny!" with a big grin, over and over and over. Fact is, on this side of Australia from Perth down to where the wine regions extend the summers are consistently warm, dry and sunny with most of the annual rain falling reliably in the winter. During the summer of 2011 when almost all of the eastern side of Australia was under water, the wine regions of Western Australia experienced an even drier year than average. Now with the 2012 crush already in the bag, it's safe to say that this harvest marks the sixth 'fine and sunny' year in a row with 2006 being the last time the weather faltered, it being a very cool year when the reds struggled to ripen (although some very fine whites were produced).

So there's not much new to report in terms of the Western Australian weather for the 2011 and 2012 vintages. Growers have made a lot of comparisons between 2011 and 2007. Like 2007, 2011 was a relatively warmer, drier year than the norm. Still, there's no excessive heat showing in the wines and I have generally found many of the whites and reds to be better balanced and a little more complex than their 2007 counterparts. The Chardonnays are ripe, bold and expressive though not too weighty and have very good freshness. It's still a little soon to call the 2011 reds, but early indications show ripe tannins and well developed flavor compounds. 2012 was also a relatively warm vintage with harvests occurring between 2 to 3 weeks ahead of the regional average for both whites and reds. The newly released whites are looking vibrant in character and generous of fruit – forward and appealing in their youth. Producers are very positive about the quality of the reds (still in barrel), though I can't comment myself until after my visit in November this year when I'll conduct barrel tastings.

Margaret River has been hogging a lot of Western Australia's limelight in recent years, especially with the region's jaw-droppingly great Chardonnays. My recent tastings of these confirms that the outlook for this variety here continues to be spectacular. Complex, multi-layered, elegant and age-worthy - if you are a Chardonnay lover you have got to get your hands of some of the Margaret River Superstars! 2010 and 2011 have yielded some highly recommended wines, in particular check out my notes for: Vasse Felix Heytesbury 2010 & 2011, Stella Bella Serie Luminosa 2010, Woodlands "Chloe" 2011, Moss Wood 2010, Cullen Kevin John 2010, Flametree S.R.S. 2011 and Xanadu Reserve 2011.

But of course the sun hasn't only been shining on Margaret River. I'd like to draw particular attention to the vast Great Southern region on Western Australia's southern tip. It's the largest region in Western Australia and can be divided into five diverse sub-regions: Frankland River, Mt Barker, Porongurup, Albany and Denmark. Significantly cooler climate than Margaret River, I'm particularly impressed with the caliber of Rieslings, Chardonnays and Shirazes Great Southern has been yielding in recent years. Pinot should on the surface of things grow well in the cooler areas of this region, but while there are a number of Pinot Noir vineyards dotted about and the wines can be good, I haven't yet been overly excited. Perhaps the Pinot vineyards simply need more time—it's a relatively



young region in the great scheme of things (a few vineyards were established in the 1960s) and Pinot Noir is still but a toddler to this area. Generally speaking though, the maturing vines and wines of Great Southern just go from strength to strength. A few knock-outs are amongst the new releases, including: Frankland Estate Netley Road 2011, Marchand & Burch Porongurup Chardonnay 2011, Howard Park Allingham 2011 (mainly Great Southern fruit), Millbrook Limited Release Shiraz 2009 and Smith Cullam Riesling 2011.

If there's anything negative to comment on regarding the recent wines coming out of Western Australia, and I am nit-picking here, it is that with this run of consistently good vintages I have noticed that complacency may be emerging when it comes to the winemaking. One thing I hate to hear when I'm talking to winemakers or read when I go through technical sheets is that wines are being made to a formula. In other words the precise same winemaking and barrel regimes are being used on the same batch of fruit every single year. The point I'm making is one that every great winemaker knows well: even if vintages are similar, they are not identical. In order to coax the very most out the fruit, each lot must be treated as an individual with individual needs and requirements. Again, I'd like to stress this is not a huge issue. Even when I know it's happening, a standardized usage of oak for example has not necessarily been to the detriment of the wine. But there are times when I definitely notice that this uniformity of handling has let the caliber of the fruit down in terms of balance and expression. As a final cautionary note to these incredibly charmed Western Australian regions, even when the sun seems to shine on everything you do, don't take your fruit or your consumer for granted!

