



Australia's McLaren Vale: Geological Wines

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I decided to tease out part of my annual South Australia report this year with an unprecedented Wine Advocate focus on McLaren Vale. Why? I believe what's happening in McLaren Vale right now signals an important paradigm shift in Australian winemaking philosophy. Perhaps more so than any other GI (Geographical Indication) in Australia, this region has made huge strides towards clearly defining and differentiating itself in recent years with remarkable results that can be tasted in the wines. One of the key drivers of this movement was not simply a knee-jerk reaction to switch from less profitable multi-regional brands to a seemingly more profitable, if rather vaguely defined, "terroir" emphasis, whatever that may be. It was something very tangible - in winemaker terms the equivalent of discovering evolution's missing link or indeed the Higgs boson. It was a map.

McLaren Vale's History

Located about 30 km south of the city of Adelaide, vines were first planted in McLaren Vale in 1838. Whereas the Barossa and Eden Valley regions to the north of Adelaide were largely settled by Germans, McLaren Vale's early pioneers were British. By the early 1860s, Englishman John Reynell was producing wines mainly from Cabernet Sauvignon but he also experimented with some of the less ubiquitous Australian imports including Pinot Gris, Tempranillo and Malbec. Thomas Hardy from Devon soon joined him for a stint at Reynell's Château Reynella before setting off on his own with the purchase of the Tintara winery (Est. 1861) in 1876, and it remains a working winery today. Around the same time, another ground-breaking vigneron, John Peake, was making wines from more commonly seen, successful Rhône varieties that continue as the backbones of the local industry today: Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvèdre (locally known as Mataro). In 1982, Château Reynella was purchased by the Hardy family and joined their rapidly expanding empire. By 2003, the company had become a major corporation known as the BRL Hardy Group, morphing into the international giant Constellation Brands. Subsequently, in 2011 it was sold to an Australian private equity company. Meanwhile in 1991, Rosemount entered the scene purchasing a 100-year-old winery that would form the McLaren Vale base for another Australian giant within the region, Treasury Wine Estates (formerly known as Fosters Wine Estates).

Today there remain a handful of well-established, historical (100 years+) small to medium-sized, family-owned wineries in the region with a solid track record of producing intrinsically McLaren Vale wines, including Kay Brothers (est. 1890), **d'Arenberg** (est. 1912) and Pirramimma (est. 1892). But into the large corporation-branded wine heydays of companies such as Rosemount and Hardy's, McLaren Vale grapes and wines were also staple blending components for large-production South Australian brands. The general, broad-brush stroke description of the style McLaren Vale black grapes (the bulk of production) can be summed as ripe, full-bodied and voluptuously fruited with blackberry preserves and chocolate box notes framed by velvety tannins. So during the time when volume and consistency were the game, it's easy to understand McLaren Vale's appeal to a master-blender contributing generosity, intensity and depth to the fruit of higher-yielding South Australia vines that were otherwise lacking. But the end of this means did not ultimately do justice to the region's potential, and it wasn't until fairly recently that there was an almost unanimous change of tack among growers in the region. This coincided with an influx of new, young winemakers establishing small wineries producing wine exclusively of McLaren Vale fruit that are, well, exclusively McLaren Vale. Some of these new-wave producers have even



banded together to form a group called, "Vale Cru," dedicated to the pursuit of high-quality, small-batch production wines. (www.valecru.com)

The Geology Map & McLaren Vale Soil Profiles

Returning to that game-changing map I mentioned, in July 2010, after decades of research performed by curious geologists, a detailed Geology Map of the entire McLaren Vale wine region - GDA 94 - was unveiled. A simple peek at what-lies-beneath revealed an astonishing truth to the local winemakers: that there was an undeniable link between marked geological variations in McLaren Vale and notable differences in the characters of the wines that the varying areas produced. Sure, they were aware of the concept of terroir and that they undoubtedly had one, but the breadth of diversity and the sheer number of terroirs that lay directly under their feet was astounding to many of the local growers. A savvy few soon realized that this map was not merely a marvelous thing to behold but potentially the key to their future.

Without spending too much time outlining the myriad of different soil types and where they exist (readers can refer to the online map for details), suffice to say that McLaren Vale pretty much runs the gamut of possible ancient soil types with an emphasis on the word "ancient" - in some cases dating back 1.6 billion years! The soil types on the map are split between those older than 500 million years and those "younger". Most of the wineries are based between the two fault lines that border the region to the north and south, rendering mainly ancient soils of the younger sort, but to put this into perspective the "ancient" soils of New Zealand are considered to be those more than 50 thousand years old. Not that the age of the soil necessarily equates to greater wine quality per se, but it does tend to yield greater variations in soil, often touted as a moot contributing factor to wine complexity, but which can be a nuisance in the pursuit of homogenous ripening unless the winemaker is right on top of what's going on down below in terms top soil and subsoil. Fortunately, given McLaren Vale's Mediterranean to downright hot and dry climate during the growing season, achieving sugar ripeness in any vineyard is not generally a problem. So knowledge of soil variations can, in fact, be used to help control vigor (e.g. use of less fertile soils with good drainage) and, if necessary, slow down ripening to encourage phenological and flavor ripeness, not to mention discernable differences that highlight "sense of place." The region currently refers to at least six sub-regional landmark divisions: Blewitt Springs, McLaren Flat, Seaview, McLaren Vale, Willunga and Sellicks, though on the basis of the soil map alone more/differing sub-regions may be called for in future once the corresponding wines are tried and tested.

Coinciding with the revealing of the Geology Map, a small group of wineries in McLaren Vale decided to put their terroirs to the test and formed the Scarce Earth project. The premise of the project is both simple and highly worthwhile - to demonstrate a range of the uniquely great terroirs that exist in McLaren Vale by getting participating wineries to isolate single vineyards and individual blocks of land planted to Shiraz (the vines must be at least 10 years old) and produce separate bottlings from the fruit. Each year McLaren Vale wineries can submit their single-block Shirazes for a blind tasting by a panel of experts, who look for vineyard expression and tend to dismiss wines in which winemaking influence (e.g. gratuitous use of oak or over-ripeness) overpowers the fruit's communication of vineyard. 2009 was the first vintage for this new initiative, with the 2011 selections just hitting cellar doors and markets now. For more information about Scarce Earth and its participating wineries:www.mclarenvale.info/scarceearth I have made a note of "Scarce Earth" wines in the tasting notes accompanying this report.



Though this may put a few Australian noses out of joint, it needs pointing out: predating this Geological Map is an important milestone in the development of McLaren Vale's geological wine pursuits that is curiously often overlooked by the locals and Australian wine writers in general - the establishment of Clarendon Hills. In 1989, Roman Bratasiuk set up Clarendon Hills in the more remote north-east Clarendon/Blewitt Springs area specifically to produce a range of small-volume, single-varietal, single-vineyard wines that would, throughout the vintage variations, demonstrate some of the great "terroirs" that McLaren Vale has to offer. And although the wines have been highly rated, appreciated and sought-after in export markets, they are rarely mentioned in Australian wine companions, encyclopedias or reviews. This has always left me scratching my head a little as I consider it to be one of Australia's great modern wine producers. More to the point, this winery already offers wine lovers a vinous history of specific sites and the nuances they reveal with bottle age. As a clear demonstration, I am grateful to Roman Bratasiuk for presenting me with small verticals from his cellar of some of his greatest vineyard sources for this report, including a vertical of the Astralis vineyard going back to 1991, for which readers can find the tasting notes in the Clarendon Hills section in the tasting notes to follow.

McLaren Vale Climate & Meso-Climates

Beyond geology, the McLaren Vale climate and meso-climates are undoubtedly important factors in determining the styles of the wines and ultimately the vine varieties that can be successfully grown here. In a nutshell, this area of South Australia is generally very dry and can be very hot during the growing season, periodically prone to heat waves. So this is generally red wine territory, mostly producing fuller-bodied styles with alcohol levels that naturally edge toward the higher end of the spectrum (15%+) in order to achieve phenolic and flavor ripeness. However, apart from moderating variations in soil fertility and water availability as mentioned above, making maximum use of meso-climates is also critical to vine selection and producing more elegant and perhaps better-balanced styles. Proximity to the Gulf of St. Vincent renders most of McLaren Vale a Mediterranean climate, with varying exposures to the ocean's cooling sea breezes. It is also a relatively hilly region with the Adelaide Hills to the east and Sellicks Hills to the south, offering variations in altitude and aspect that growers can and do use to their advantage.

Grape Varieties

Presiding as the "international judge" at the McLaren Vale Wine Show a few years ago, I was pulled up by Chairman Tom Carson for giving most of the wines in the Sauvignon Blanc category 12s and 13s (out of 20 points). He informed me that scores that low were usually given only to wines with faults, to which I retorted, "There is a fault. They shouldn't be growing Sauvignon Blanc in McLaren Vale." I'm happy to say that within a few short years since that incident, many of the locals have given up jousting the Sauvignon Blanc windmill in a climate too hot to produce anything remotely interesting from the grape, though there are a few that still persist because the grape is "so popular" at cellar doors. The point is that, apart from a deeper understanding of the geology of McLaren Vale, winemakers are more attuned than ever to working with, rather than fighting against, their climate. If they have a pressing need to produce wines from white grapes then they have either sought parcels in the cooler neighboring Adelaide Hills (a few are included in this report) or looked to plant whites that are better suited to warmer climates such as Fiano, Verdelho, Muscat and Viognier. Or they (more) simply produce some very impressive rosés from red varietals such as Grenache.

Rhône varietals traditionally and today are, in my view, the greatest offerings out of the region. The potential quality of Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvèdre (separately or as a blend) can and often does hit the extraordinary end of the scale. Cabernet Sauvignon can be very good to outstanding but it is much more vintage and site-



specific than the Rhône varietals, which are generally way more tolerant and consistent. There are a lot of experimental variety interlopers emerging from McLaren Vale: Tempranillo, Sangiovese, Graciano, Lagrein, Saperavi, Sagrantino, Barbera, etc. The jury is still out for me when considering the success of these varietals in terms of quality and ability to express something that is uniquely McLaren Vale. It's still early days, and though I'm not overly impressed at this stage, I love being pleasantly surprised.

Vintages

2010 was an outstanding to extraordinary year for McLaren Vale reds, with "near perfect" growing conditions often quoted by the local winemakers. And it shows in the wines, particularly now with a few years in bottle to allow the subtler nuances to emerge from the veils of ripe, voluptuous fruit. This is a remarkable vintage for the cellar - what more can I say?

Although the wetter/cooler season and subsequent disease pressure may have been "testing," in the downplaying words of some producers, **2011** represents a good to very good vintage for some McLaren Vale wineries, a few even producing their best wines for years of some well-known labels. From a taster's point of view it was clearly not an easy vintage, as the smaller volumes of some of the wines will attest, but it seemed to get winemakers really thinking about their harvest/winemaking decisions and that extra care and attention really shows in many of the wines. Some lovely perfumed, spicy/peppery, refreshingly medium bodied Shirazes and Grenaches were made in 2011, though Cabernet Sauvignon was generally less successful (disappointingly so in some cases) with leanness and notable green streaks to the wines. Some very good (unusually so) white wines were also produced this year.

2012 was a classic/outstanding year for McLaren Vale: dry, warm and sunny throughout. A particularly dry spring lowered yields at fruit set, contributing to the resulting richness in the wines. Some of the best reds still have yet to be released but those that were submitted for this tasting revealed the wonderfully consistent ripeness of tannins and generosity of flavors for which this region is known!

Though the reds are mostly still in barrel or have yet to be released, **2013** was by all accounts something of a fast and furious vintage. Smaller crops and warmer weather with a few heat-wave episodes brought about an earlier and, in some cases, rushed harvest. There were reported incidents of berry shrivel - something to be on the lookout for in the wines. The styles at this primordial stage have been described as rich, concentrated and fuller bodied, though none of these descriptors, of course, are at all atypical of McLaren Vale's style! As always, ultimately the proof will be in the tasting once the wines are available in bottle.



Score Summary:

94+ pts	d'Arenberg Scarce Earth The Blind Tiger Shiraz 2011
93+ pts	d'Arenberg The Other Side Single Vineyard Shiraz 2011
93+ pts	d'Arenberg Tyche's Mustard Single Vineyard Shiraz 2011
93 pts	d'Arenberg The Dead Arm Shiraz 2010
92+ pts	d'Arenberg The Eight Iron Shiraz 2011
92+ pts	d'Arenberg The Swinging Malaysian Single Vineyard Shiraz 2011
92 pts	d'Arenberg Scarce Earth The Piceous Lodestar Shiraz 2011
90 pts	d'Arenberg Ironstone Pressings (Grenache / Shiraz) 2010
90 pts	d'Arenberg The Noble Mud Pie 2011
90 pts	d'Arenberg The Noble Wrinkled Riesling 2011
89+ pts	d'Arenberg D'Arry's Original Shiraz / Grenache 2010
88+ pts	d'Arenberg The High Trellis Cabernet Sauvignon 2011
88 pts	d'Arenberg The Dry Dam Riesling 2013
88 pts	d'Arenberg The Love Grass Shiraz 2011
88 pts	d'Arenberg The Stump Jump Sticky Chardonnay Riesling Semillon Pinot Gris 2010
87 pts	d'Arenberg Cadenzia Grenache 2010
87 pts	d'Arenberg The Broken Fishplate Sauvignon Blanc 2013
87 pts	d'Arenberg The Footbolt Shiraz 2011
87 pts	d'Arenberg The Laughing Magpie Shiraz / Viognier 2010
87 pts	d'Arenberg The Love Grass Shiraz 2010
87 pts	d'Arenberg The Olive Grove Chardonnay 2012
87pts	d'Arenberg The Stump Jump Riesling 2012
86 pts	d'Arenberg Lucky Lizard Chardonnay 2012
86 pts	d'Arenberg The Stump Jump Riesling 2013
85 pts	d'Arenberg The Stump Jump Lightly Wooded Chardonnay 2011
85 pts	d'Arenberg The Money Spider Roussanne 2012



Full Reviews:

d'Arenberg

94+ pts d'Arenberg Scarce Earth The Blind Tiger Shiraz 2011

Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2011 Scarce Earth The Blind Tiger Shiraz has a nose of charcoal, tar, dark chocolate and licorice over a core of warm black plums and cassis. Full-bodied and generously fruited on the palate with layers of plum, mocha and blackcurrant flavors, it has a firm level of rounded tannins, balanced acidity and a finish with great persistence. Drink it now to 2024+.

93+ pts d'Arenberg The Other Side Single Vineyard Shiraz 2011

Very deep purple-black colored and intensely scented of crushed blueberries and fresh blackberries with hints of black pepper, aniseed, cloves and black earth, the medium to full-bodied 2011 The Other Side Shiraz fills the mouth with tons of muscular, pepper-laced, blackberry flavor structured by firm, grainy tannins and refreshing acid before it finishes with great length. Drink it now to 2022+.

93+ pts d'Arenberg Tyche's Mustard Single Vineyard Shiraz 2011

Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2011 Tyche's Mustard Shiraz is a little closed at this youthful stage, though it offers up notes of crushed blackberries, cassis and tar, accented by hints of pepper, licorice and coffee. Full-bodied, tightly knit and firmly structured in the mouth, it has a great backbone of grainy tannins and lively acid carrying the youthful flavors through to a long finish. Drink it 2015 to 2025+.

93 pts d'Arenberg The Dead Arm Shiraz 2010

Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2010 Dead Arm Shiraz has slightly evolving blackberry notes wafting over a core of forest fruit coulis and dried mulberries accented by suggestions of sandalwood, Indian spices and dried Mediterranean herbs. Medium to full-bodied with loads of evolved black fruit and savory, spicy flavors on offer in the mouth, it has a medium to firm level of powdery tannins, refreshing acid and a long finish. Drink it now to 2021+.

92+ pts d'Arenberg The Eight Iron Shiraz 2011

Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2011 The Eight Iron Shiraz presents aromas of mulberries, black cherries, wild blueberries and sauteed herbs with underlying pepper and violet hints. Medium-bodied and tightly wound in the mouth, it has a firm level of finely grained tannins and crisp acid to support the intense, black and blue fruit flavors on the long and spicy finish. Drink it now to 2023+.

92+ pts d'Arenberg The Swinging Malaysian Single Vineyard Shiraz 2011

Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2011 The Swinging Malaysian Shiraz is scented of warm blackcurrants, crushed blueberries and black plums with underlying chargrilled meat, pepper, star anise and damp earth nuances. Full-bodied and packed with taut, muscular, black fruit flavors, it has a firm level of grainy tannins and balanced acid to frame the flesh through the long, pepper-laced finish. Drink it now to 2023+.



- 92 pts d'Arenberg Scarce Earth The Piceous Lodestar Shiraz 2011**
Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2011 Scarce Earth The Piceous Lodestar Shiraz exudes lovely blackcurrant cordial and preserved black cherry notes on the nose, with nuances of red roses, chargrilled meat and tar. Full-bodied with mouth-filling black fruit and savory flavors, it has medium to firm, velvety tannins and lively acid through the long finish. Drink it now to 2021+.
- 90 pts d'Arenberg Ironstone Pressings (Grenache / Shiraz) 2010**
Medium to deep garnet with a hint of purple, the 2010 Ironstone Pressings GSM shows off a fragrant nose of warm black and red berries, cherry preserves, cinnamon stick and garrigue dotted with a hint of Szechuan pepper. Medium-bodied and a little lean in the mouth for this style, it has a medium level of chewy tannins, balanced acid and a finish with good length. Drink it now to 2018+.
- 90 pts d'Arenberg The Noble Mud Pie 2011**
Pale gold-amber in color, the 2011 The Noble Mud Pie Viognier Marsanne Pinot Gris is intensely scented of sultanas, acacia honey and figs with a core of apricot preserves and spice cake. Fully sweet and concentrated, the light alcohol (8.2%) palate gives plenty of richness offset by refreshing acidity through to a finish with great length. Drink it now to 2018+.
- 90 pts d'Arenberg The Noble Wrinkled Riesling 2011**
Pale amber-colored and scented of honeyed hot lemon drink, preserved peaches and orange marmalade with a whiff of frangipani, the palate on the 2011 Noble Wrinkled Riesling reveals a good amount of sweetness and relatively straightforward, dried stone fruit and preserved citrus flavors matched by crisp acidity and a long finish. Drink it now to 2018+.
- 89+ pts d'Arenberg D'Arry's Original Shiraz / Grenache 2010**
Medium garnet in color, the 2010 d'Arry's Original Shiraz Grenache fills the glass with aromas of blackberry preserves, kirsch and dried mulberries highlighted by nuances of baking spices, damp earth and white pepper. Medium-bodied with a good amount of expressive red and black fruit flavors complemented by earth and spice hints, it has just enough rounded tannins and lively acid to finish with good length. Drink it now to 2018+.
- 88+ pts d'Arenberg The High Trellis Cabernet Sauvignon 2011**
Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2011 High Trellis Cabernet Sauvignon gives notes of creme de cassis, cedar, toast and dark chocolate with a whiff of eucalyptus. Medium to full-bodied, the ample fruit is well-structured by medium to firm grainy tannins and vibrant acid. It finishes long and just a little herbal. Drink it now to 2018+.
- 88 pts d'Arenberg The Dry Dam Riesling 2013**
Opening with expressive aromas of honeysuckle, white peaches and lime cordial with a hint of orange peel, the medium dry and light-bodied 2013 The Dry Dam Riesling is marked by a crisp and zippy acid line through to the long, refreshing finish. Drink it now to 2017+.



88 pts d'Arenberg The Love Grass Shiraz 2011

Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2011 The Love Grass Shiraz has a spicy, pepper-laced perfume over a core of crushed black berries and blueberries, plus a hint of lavender. Medium-bodied and elegantly fruited in the mouth, it gives a good amount of spicy flavors and medium to firm chewy tannins with balanced acid and a peppery finish of decent persistence. Drink it now to 2018.

88 pts d'Arenberg The Stump Jump Sticky Chardonnay Riesling Semillon Pinot Gris 2010

Pale gold-amber in color, the 2010 The Stump Jump Sticky Chardonnay Riesling Semillon Pinot Gris exudes aromas of lemon marmalade, honeycomb and musk perfume with a touch of preserved ginger. Full-bodied, rich and concentrated, it has a good, vibrant backbone of acidity cutting through the dense sweetness through the long finish. Drink it now to 2017.

87 pts d'Arenberg Cadenzia Grenache 2010

Medium garnet in color, the 2010 Cadenzia Grenache shows evolving red fruit aromas of red cherry preserves and red currant jelly with hints of spice cake, white pepper and dusty earth. Medium-bodied with a crisp acid line to cut through the maturing, earthy flavors, it has a low level of chewy tannins to support through the finish with good length. Drink it now to 2017.

87 pts d'Arenberg The Broken Fishplate Sauvignon Blanc 2013

The 2013 The Broken Fishplate Sauvignon Blanc opens with clean, green apple and fresh pear notes wafting over a pleasant herbal undercurrent. Light-bodied and dry with good amount of straightforward apple and sage-laced flavors, it finishes medium to long. Drink it now to 2015.

87 pts d'Arenberg The Footbolt Shiraz 2011

Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2011 The Footbolt Shiraz is scented of crushed blackberries and black cherries with hints of anise and mint. Medium to full-bodied with mouth-filling blackberry and menthol flavors, it has a low to medium level of soft tannins and finishes with good length and harmony, if a bit simply. Drink it now to 2016.

87 pts d'Arenberg The Laughing Magpie Shiraz / Viognier 2010

Medium garnet in color with a lingering hint of purple, the 2010 Laughing Magpie Shiraz Viognier gives aromas of blackberry compote, dried mulberries and dried Provence herbs with touches of pepper and tree bark. Light to medium-bodied and rather modestly fruited for this wine in the mouth, it has a medium level of chewy tannins, balanced acid and a medium to long finish. Drink it now to 2017.

87 pts d'Arenberg The Love Grass Shiraz 2010

Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2010 The Love Grass Shiraz presents blackcurrants and black plums on the nose with touches of tar, fertile earth and licorice. Medium bodied with plenty of chewy tannins to texture the savory black fruits, it finishes medium to long and earthy. Drink it now to 2016.

87 pts d'Arenberg The Olive Grove Chardonnay 2012

The 2012 The Olive Grove Chardonnay shows peaches, spiced apple slices and cream on the nose laced with hints of honeysuckle and baking bread. Medium-bodied with a good amount of clean apple and stone fruit flavors in the mouth, it finishes with decent persistence. Drink it now to 2016.



87 pts d'Arenberg The Stump Jump Riesling 2012

With intense lime leaf and grapefruit oil aromas accented by floral notes, the dry, light-bodied 2012 The Stump Jump Riesling has a slight phenolic grip in the mouth while offering appealing freshness and varietal vibrancy through the medium to long finish. Drink it now to 2017.

86 pts d'Arenberg Lucky Lizard Chardonnay 2012

Scented of ripe apple, pears and white peaches with touches of nutmeg and ginger, the light-bodied 2012 The Lucky Lizard Chardonnay is crisp, fresh and clean in the mouth offering up just enough unadulterated fruit expression in the mouth and finishing medium to long. Drink it now to 2016.

86 pts d'Arenberg The Stump Jump Riesling 2013

The 2013 The Stump Jump Riesling is scented of freshly squeezed lemons and yuzu with underlying grass and lime hints. Light-bodied and dry with a zesty backbone of crisp acidity, it fills the palate with mouthwatering freshness before finishing long and citrusy. Drink it now to 2018.

85 pts d'Arenberg The Stump Jump Lightly Wooded Chardonnay 2011

The 2011 The Stump Jump Lightly Wooded Chardonnay opens up with unadulterated notes of fresh apples and pears over a citrusy undercurrent. Medium-bodied with straightforward lemon and apple flavors in the mouth, the refreshing acid line lends lift through the medium to long finish. Drink it now to 2015.

85 pts d'Arenberg The Money Spider Roussanne 2012

The 2012 The Money Spider Roussanne shows off notes of bruised apple, straw and beeswax with a touch of lemongrass. Medium-bodied with a pleasant oiliness to the texture and just enough savory, yeasty flavors, it finishes with medium persistence. Drink it now to 2015.