



## South Australia: Post New Sensation

Lisa Perotti-Brown

The Wine Advocate | Issue #211, February 2014

As I pen this introduction to my annual South Australia report during a visit to Sydney, a new docudrama series is set to grip the country. It's based on the rise and abrupt fall of Australia's most globally popular band ever, INXS. I, for one, can't wait to see the first episode tomorrow night. My anticipation made me reflect on how there seemed to exist a moratorium period during which no one felt comfortable mentioning, let alone listening to, the music of this hugely successful band after the tragic suicide of lead singer Michael Hutchence in 1997. It's as though as humans we're wired to mourn and move on when it comes to not just the passing of people but the loss of an era. The phenomenon probably translates to the death of most "new sensations" that pass through our lives, to borrow the title of an INXS song. The uncomfortable awkwardness of this passing herds us toward the next life-affirming new sensation, while the memory of the old one is buried. And when at last we can allow ourselves to revisit that memory, the break affords us at best a nostalgic fondness, though it seems unlikely that we will ever be able to embrace that same "new sensation" as we once did. By definition, a forgotten pop band or any other new sensation can never again be "new," which is not to say that it will forevermore remain dead to us as a sensation...but it will need to reinvent itself.

South Australia is the Australia's wine-producing state that first brought the country's wines to international acclaim. It was the wine world's "new sensation" of the late 1980s and 1990s, extending for a good run into the early 2000s. The development and success of large brands such as Jacob's Creek, Rosemount and later Yellowtail, which carried that Australian "sunshine in a glass" to overseas mass markets and for a while, it seemed, Australian wines, at that time sourced almost exclusively from South Australia, would continue to usurp market shares in the key importing nations of the UK followed by the USA. The easy-drinking, fruit-forward style of the cheaper, vast volume wines seemed to effortlessly morph to a ripe, concentrated, in-your-face, high-octane style at the fine wine end, and so the new sensation easily translated across price points and consumer needs.

But after the downfall, it almost goes without saying that South Australia has weathered a difficult time over the last few years. Sales of many large brands in the export markets and domestically have plummeted, taking the fine wine end of the market down with them. Admittedly there were many factors involved here, not least of all the GFC, the strength of the Australian dollar and increased competition from other wine-producing countries. But another major contributor to the downfall was simply that consumers began to tire of the South Australian-led "new sensation" and moved on to wines from Argentina, Chile, South Africa or migrated back to the Old World. After a few years of malingering sales, the obvious move was for South Australia to reinvent itself through its messaging and, more importantly, through its styles.

Regionality has been the buzz word in South Australia in recent years, with a notable movement for each of the major GIs (Geographical Indications) to clearly define and differentiate themselves. The emphasis on regionality is undoubtedly an important step toward forging fresh, new stylistic signatures. With an emphasis on a sense of place/region comes a greater acceptance of the expression of vintage, and whereas vintage variation may have



been formerly be minimized through cross-regional blending, now producers are embracing each growing season's differences and making the best of them. This again lends to the crafting of the new styles, with the cooler, wetter 2011 vintage marking something of a watershed, opening winemakers' eyes to what was possible at the marginal ends of ripeness. I, for one, have found the movements and styles that are emerging across the major South Australia regions, especially Barossa, Eden Valley, Clare Valley, McLaren Vale, Adelaide Hills and Coonawarra, to be incredibly exciting. For drinkers of a broad range of styles - from elegant Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs from cooler climate Adelaide Hills, to zesty, age-worthy Rieslings from Eden and Clare Vallies to rich, expressive and yet now more medium-bodied Shirazes and Grenaches from the Barossa and McLaren Vale to the perfumed, structured Cabernet Sauvignons coming from a handful of Coonawarra producers who have really pulled up their socks - South Australia is ascending from its past-it "new sensation" status to offering regionally unique wines that, given the chance, will attract life-long fans from throughout the world.

For readers who haven't had an opportunity to see it yet, please check out my dedicated McLaren Vale report this issue for all the details about the extra "geological" lengths this region is going to in order to achieve impactful, long-term greatness through it wines.

#### South Australia's Vintages

With this new emphasis on vintage expression, marked vintage variation in recent years across South Australia, and each winery releasing their vintages at different times, it's difficult to produce a brief vintage summary for readers and a meaningful/relevant buyer's guide. So I'll try to keep this as brief as possible, while covering some back vintages that are only just being released by a few of the top wineries (e.g. their "icon" labels), at the risk of repeating myself with snippets from former reports.

**2009** produced some very good to exceptional wines around South Australia, but not across the board. The heat-wave in late January/early February, which brought temperatures topping 40 degrees Celsius (104+ degrees Fahrenheit) for 17 days in some areas, wreaked havoc on earlier ripening and particularly white grapes. Higher-yielding vines and those under water-stress, such as younger vines, also did not fare so well. But the backbone of the South Australian wine industry is in the later-ripening varieties - Grenache, Shiraz and Mataro - with many of the older vines possessing well-established root systems. Some of these vineyards coped very well, since they had yet to go through that critical period of veraison when the heat hit and there was little or no damage to the fruit. After the heat subsided, the rest of the growing season saw dry, relatively mild conditions with temperatures in the mid-20s to early 30s for the most part. In spite of the old-vine factor, later status of ripening for some vines and moderate heat following the heat wave, there was also the issue of vines shutting down during the extreme heat and a lag period before they restarted, in some cases stunting the development of tannins and flavor compounds. Many growers were able to pick later and certainly at a more relaxed pace than either of the previous two vintages as they waited for the phenolics to be resolved, but in some cases this just never happened, and this is noticeable in those wines with hard tannins and less complexity than one would ordinarily expect in a uniformly great year.

**2010** was a fairly hot year for most of South Australia, with the big difference being that, apart from an early spell of heat in November that caused some damage at flowering/lower yields (especially for Cabernet Sauvignon), there was a relatively even distribution of heat across the season. Most growers report the year as, "smooth



sailing" with "near-perfect" growing conditions often quoted by the local winemakers. The wines seem to emulate that effortlessness - the whites are at the riper and more vibrantly fruited end of their spectrum with very good acid lines, while the reds are generally very pure and generously fruited without being overly heavy/alcoholic and with approachable, ripe tannins. A remarkable vintage for the cellar producing some simply incredible wines - what more can I say?

The weather in **2011** was unusually cool and wet (very wet in some places) for most of South Australia, with McLaren Vale faring notably better than other regions. Some lovely perfumed, spicy/peppery, lighter 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 white wines were also produced this year. So the best 2011 wines are very good but a real stylistic departure from the perhaps preconceived big, fruit-driven, high-octane notions of South Australian reds. They are medium-bodied with earthy/savory/spicy characters and relatively light (when well-managed) on the tannins. In short, readers should not write off the 2011 reds based on vintage alone.

A classic/outstanding year, **2012** was a reasonably dry, sunny, faith-restoring vintage for South Australian growers, with no extreme heat episodes and but a few patches of benevolent rain. Rick Burge of Burge Family Winemakers also pointed out, "2012 probably benefitted greatly from the wet 2011 vintage, in that there were good levels of sub-soil moisture after a number of pretty dry years in a row." The styles and signatures from 2012 are back to those generous flavors that we all know and love, but I would like to think winemakers learned a thing or two from 2011 and are crafting with a new-found courage for forging elegance, while working with the intensity that warmer vintages and regions naturally want to give. Generally speaking, 2012 was a great year for Clare and Eden Valley Riesling, yielding exotic fruit-scented, surprisingly forward and approachable wines that have the concentration and acid backbones to stand the test of time. The 2012 Shirazes, Grenaches, Mataros (Mourvèdres) and Cabernet Sauvignons that have already been released in bottle from South Australia are difficult to find fault with - ripe tannins and plenty of fruit with enough freshness to bestow infinite drinkability.

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 look-out 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 most regional styles coming out of South Australia! As always, ultimately the proof will be in the tasting. As for the Rieslings out of Clare and Eden Valley, these are looking very fine indeed. Jeffrey Grosset of Grosset winery in Clare Valley reported dry and warm conditions (albeit slightly cooler than average). He commented, "Unique to 2013 are the low pH levels. These are the lowest pH levels I have experienced in 33 years. Low pH is something winemakers get excited about, because the wines are tighter and appear more mineral, almost chalky. However while pH is often associated with high acidity, this is definitely not the case this year."

As I write this report from Australia, it's approaching 2014 crush time in South Australia. For a sneak preview of what to possibly expect, readers can refer to my report above on the 2009 vintage, because we have a similar situation happening around South Australia now. The region is experiencing a heat-wave of 40+ degree C



temperatures (104+ degrees Fahrenheit) throughout early to mid-February, which will undoubtedly be impacting the vines. The results will depend on the stage of ripening of the vines when the heat-wave hit, how long it will last and what the weather will do after the heat subsides. Also worth noting were the bush (forest) fires that raged through Eden Valley mid-vintage this year, coming very close in one incidence to Henschke. Currently the local producers are downplaying the possibility of smoke taint in the wines, as purportedly there was little smoke due to grass burning as opposed to gum (eucalypt) trees. It happened just prior to veraison, and the wind was blowing favorably away from the grapes, but, as always, ultimately the truth will be obvious in the wines when they're tasted.

*A large portion of the tasting notes for this report was segmented into the dedicated McLaren Vale report also available this issue. My apologies that this is only Part 1 of what will be a two-part report on South Australia's wines, with many notes still to come in Part 2, which will be featured in the next issue.*

## Score Summary:

<b>98+ pts</b>	John Duval Wines Eligo 2010
<b>90+ pts</b>	John Duval Wines Entity 2011
<b>89+ pts</b>	John Duval Wines Plexus 2011

## Full Reviews:

### **98+ pts** John Duval Wines Eligo 2010

Deep garnet-purple colored and profoundly scented of blueberry preserves, blackberry tart and chocolate box intermingled with an undercurrent of star anise, coffee, rare beef and tar, the full-bodied 2010 Eligo Shiraz is richly fruited with layers of opulent, berry preserve and spice cake flavors supported by a solid foundation of firm, velvety tannins and balanced acid. It finishes with outstanding persistence. Approachable now, it should drink best 2016 to 2028+.

### **90+ pts** John Duval Wines Entity 2011

Medium to deep garnet-purple in color, the 2011 Entity Shiraz is attractively scented of crushed blackberries, red plums and mulberries with underlying Szechuan pepper and Provencal herb hints. Medium to full-bodied, it has a good concentration of red and black berry flavors in the mouth marked by an herbal streak and a vibrant acid backbone. It finishes long and chewy. Drink it now to 2020+.

### **89+ pts** John Duval Wines Plexus 2011

A blend of Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvedre, the medium to deep garnet colored 2011 Plexus Shiraz offers up an alluring nose of kirsch, warm red currants and spiced black cherries with underlying nuances of rose petals, dried herbs, cinnamon and pepper. Medium to full-bodied with just enough expressive fruit in the mouth, it has a medium level of chewy tannins, bright acidity and a finish with good length. Drink it now to 2020+.