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## The World's Most-Overlooked Fine-Wine Regions?

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by Matt Kramer

*Here's one nomination, anyway*

MARGARET RIVER, Australia—I'm sure that you, every bit as well as I, can compile a list of "most-overlooked regions that create truly fine wines" (and do feel free, if you'd like to take a stab at it). This designation is a surprisingly competitive category, with contestants such as Canada's Ontario and Okanagan Valley zones, South Africa's Stellenbosch district, New Zealand's Hawkes Bay district, various parts of southern Italy and the like.

The term "overlooked" deserves definition. In this context, I am suggesting that "overlooked" means not so much that no one has paid any attention at all. Today, you can find varying degrees of attention for pretty much any wine zone in the world. There's always someone posting a tasting note somewhere.

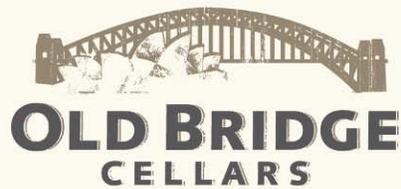
Instead, "overlooked" refers to the idea of a district or region not being justly recognized as a benchmark; that it's a place that cannot (or at least should not) be ignored for its chosen varieties or style of wine, yet largely is. Imagine, for example, Chablis not being cited among the world's finest Chardonnays.

Let me give you a before-and-after example. In its early years, Oregon's Willamette Valley saw a remarkable amount of press for what was, in fact, a highly variable bunch of Pinot Noirs. It garnered attention more for its tantalizing promise than for a consistency of high accomplishment. Oregon was hardly "overlooked," in the narrow sense of acquiring attention.

Now, however, Oregon Pinot Noir has become a cannot-be-ignored benchmark. The measure of this is simple: If you read an article about modern Pinot Noirs you can be certain that Oregon will be mentioned, if not featured. A consistency of quality, allied to a vitally important critical mass of wines and wineries, along with an equally vital breadth of distribution, means that Oregon cannot now be "overlooked."

The same was true, by the way, back in 1976 when a 1973 vintage Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon bested a bunch of top-growth red Bordeaux in the now-legendary "Judgment of Paris" wine tasting.

At the time, no one knew—because it simply could not be known—whether Stag's Leap Wine Cellar's achievement was a one-off or whether its triumphant quality represented something in the very "bone of the land" itself.



Could it be repeated over more vintages, as well as by other producers? After all, the winery's first vintage was only one year earlier, in 1972. Was it a quirky comet never to be glimpsed again, or the real terroir thing? Now we know, of course, thanks to a critical mass of both vintages and wineries, as well as having the helpful focus of a defined geographic zone.

I thought of all this while visiting the Margaret River area in Western Australia, a three-hour drive south of Perth. Margaret River and its wines have been a long time coming. The earliest producer, the still-thriving Vasse Felix winery, was founded only in 1967. By American standards that can seem long ago, but Australia's wine continuity never was interrupted by Prohibition, so Australia has a far longer, richer sense of wine history. Margaret River wine is a new creation compared with an impressively large number of much older districts.

I've been to Margaret River only once before, quite a few years ago, and have been remiss in keeping up. So on a recent trip to Australia I made a point of returning, to acquire at least an impression of the latest accomplishments.

To that end, I made arrangements to meet, ironically enough, an American: Will Berliner, the owner and winemaker of a small, biodynamic vineyard called Cloudburst. Mr. Berliner, 60, married an Australian woman who, after living in the United States for years, pined for home (which, actually, was Sydney, not Margaret River).

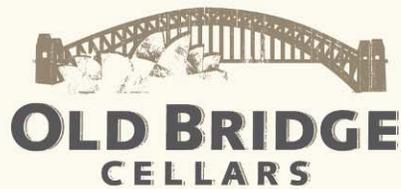
In yet another one of those improbable winery success stories, Mr. Berliner bought land in Margaret River and, despite having no previous experience in either growing grapes, making wine or even, according to him anyway, tasting or drinking much in the way of fine wine, promptly swept the boards of the 2013 Margaret River Wine Show with his first vintage. His 2010 Cloudburst Cabernet Sauvignon, the winery's first-ever red, won trophies in that competition for best Cabernet Sauvignon, best single-vineyard red, and best red wine of show.

As you might imagine, Cloudburst became not merely the talk of the town (which barely rose above a murmur, given that the entire region has only about 12,000 people), but of Australia's nationwide wine community. After all, Margaret River has carved out a reputation for some pretty fine Cabernet Sauvignon among Australian wine fanciers, and such a "Judgment of Margaret River" triumph surely raised some eyebrows.

And you can be sure they were raised even higher when people learned the asking prices for Mr. Berliner's Cloudburst wines: AUS\$200 for the Chardonnay (US\$156) and about AUS\$270 (US\$210) for the Cabernet Sauvignon. I hardly need describe the harrumphing about such hubris (if Aussies know the word "chutzpah" I've never heard them say it).

Mr. Berliner, a native New Yorker, most certainly knows that word. And he doesn't care. Nor should he. So far, Cloudburst's total production is just 450 cases from a 1.25-acre unirrigated vineyard. (Mr. Berliner plans to expand to 3 acres of vines in the next few years.) And both the Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon are good. Indeed, for this taster anyway, they are exceptional, although not uniquely so. Rather, they dwell in the top rank of what Margaret River can offer by way of these two grape varieties.

And that, in turn, brings me to my larger point about being "overlooked." The top rank of Margaret River Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon is, simply put, in the top rank in the world. And by that, I'm including the likes of Burgundy (for the Chardonnay) and Bordeaux and Napa Valley (for Cabernet Sauvignon).



Do the best Margaret River versions of these two varieties resemble these benchmarks? Not at all. And that's a good thing. They are as fine, in their fashion, as all but the highest achievers of those more famous zones. Yet they are different. It's originality that we should be seeking in our finest wines, not replication.

Sampling a sweep of some 70 Margaret River wines, in addition to more focused tasting at individual wineries, revealed not only the usual range of qualities from blandly commercial to truly extraordinary, but a consistency of place as well.

The Chardonnays are lean, precise creatures that clearly respond to, even require, barrel-fermentation and lees-stirring for their pure, high-acid fruitiness to blossom. If there's a minor quibble to be mentioned it's that the Chardonnays can display a slight bitterness and astringency in the finish, likely from the oak. Like an Olympic gymnast with no apparent body fat, these succulent, palate-staining Chardonnays redolent of lemon curd have nowhere to hide. A fat, juicy, buttery style of Chardonnay would more easily cover up the slight bitterness on the finish. But it's not in the gene pool, as it were.

Margaret River Cabernets are, ironically, more like what fine red Bordeaux used to taste like. They are balletically graceful wines of elegance and finesse—two well-worn terms that have lost much of their meaning thanks to promiscuous (and often inappropriate) use, but which here are no less appropriate for all that. Taste the likes of a Leeuwin Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Art Series (the 2005 won my vote as the single best wine I tasted on my trip, with their Chardonnay not far behind) or any vintage you can find of Cullen Diana Madeline Cabernet Sauvignon (the 2012 is stunning) and I defy you to apply any characterizations other than elegance and finesse.

All of which brings us to that business of "overlooked." I ask you: How often do you hear about, read about or taste Margaret River wines? Regrettably infrequently, I would venture to guess. Yet the wines, at their best, rank among the most distinctive, original-tasting and worthwhile of any on the planet.

Is Margaret River one of the world's most overlooked fine-wine regions? It sure is. And it's hardly alone. I'll leave it to you to nominate yet others.