



South Australia: Barossa and Eden Valley

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This year I've decided to divide the massive land area of South Australia - responsible for more than half of Australia's entire wine production by volume - into separate, regionally focused reports in order to offer readers sharper color of the unique styles and vintage variations within this very important state. Not only have export markets come of age in terms of their awareness and understanding of these distinct regions, but I have found in recent years an increasing trend among South Australia's growers to strive evermore toward expressing their wine's own sense of place. These reports will include: Barossa Valley (including Eden Valley), Clare Valley, McLaren Vale/ Fleurieu, Adelaide Hills and Coonawarra / the Limestone Coast.

It makes sense that my first report focuses on the "heartland" of South Australia's quality wines - Barossa Valley - which itself can be subdivided into the Barossa and Eden Valleys.

Most of the major Barossa-based producers are covered in this report as well a few exciting up-and-coming producers. However, there are a few producers that I will be covering during my forthcoming visit to this area in September. One major omission that will feature in an end-of-September report will be the Penfolds Icon and Bin releases, which I plan to taste at Magill Estate in early September.

Barossa's Recent Vintages

A classic/outstanding year, 2012 was a dry, sunny, faith-restoring vintage for Barossa and Eden Valley growers, with no extreme heat episodes (as occurred in 2008 and 2009) and only a few patches of benevolent rain, though nothing close to the deluge of 2011. Rick Burge of Burge Family Winemakers 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 it is clear that winemakers learned a thing or two from 2011 and crafted their wines 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 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 are difficult to find fault with as they show ripe tannins and plenty of fruit with enough freshness to bestow infinite drinkability. This is a vintage of great purity, but at the upper end perhaps just lacks the incredible depth and complexity of the best 2010 wines.

2013 was a fast and furious vintage. Harvest occurred around three weeks earlier than normal in Barossa. Smaller crops and very dry, warmer weather with a few heat-wave episodes brought about this 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 are rich, concentrated and fuller-bodied, though none of these descriptors, of course, are at all atypical of this area of South Australia. The shorter growing season has, however, resulted in some cases of unresolved, hard tannins and flavors that lack the layers that the greatest Barossa vintages can yield. As for the Rieslings out of Eden Valley, these are forward, expressive wines with great acid backbones.

Although it is still early days for judging the wines, 2014 was something of a roller-coaster vintage of extremes and challenges. Barossa experienced a heat-wave of 40+ degree C temperatures (104+ degrees Fahrenheit) throughout early to mid-February, which undoubtedly had an impact on ripening. The results will depend on the stage of ripening of the vines when the heat wave hit. After this heat wave came the rains. Troy Kalleske of Kalleske Wines noted, "The 2014 growing season began with slightly above average winter rainfall, however spring and early summer were very dry with 40% less rain than normal. Temperatures were also up with the spring/summer growing season being an average of 2 degrees C warmer. However, this dry and warm season changed dramatically in mid-February with 100mm of rain falling, the wettest February day in 45 years. This slowed the ripening of the grapes considerably and combined with average mild temperatures in March (25.7 degrees C) a steady ripening of the grapes ensued." Cameron Ashmead of Elderton commented, "The rains were good because the baumes were looking high and the rains brought them back down." Also worth noting were the bush (forest) fires that raged through Eden Valley mid-vintage this year, coming very close in one incident to Henschke. Local producers have downplayed 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. So, while there were a lot of challenges to consider in 2014, I'll reserve judgement on the vintage in general, and the reds in particular, until I've tasted more of the wines. Thus far my tastings of 2014 have largely been of the Rieslings, which are in fact looking clean, very fine, and while youthful, are vibrant and approachable even at this early stage.

Reviews Below:



97+ pts John Duval Eligo 2012

Medium to deep garnet-purple colored, the 2012 Eligo has a profoundly scented nose of crème de cassis, blackberry pie, licorice, dark chocolate and blueberry preserves against an earthy/meaty background of bacon fat, forest floor, beef dripping and black loam. The densely packed, full-bodied palate manages almost paradoxical elegance and restraint with velvety tannins and lively acid giving closure to the long, multilayered finish.

92 pts John Duval Plexus 2012

A Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvedre blend, the 2012 Plexus has a medium-dense garnet color and offers kirsch, preserved plums, blueberry pie and dried mulberry notes with a Christmas fruit cake undercurrent. Full-bodied and packed with spicy, blackberry preserves flavors, it has velvety tannins and a refreshing lift in the long finish.

91 pts John Duval Annexus 2013

Pale to medium ruby-purple colored, the 2013 Annexus has a nose of kirsch, red roses and raspberry preserves with hints of clove studded orange peel and dusty earth. Medium to full-bodied with great freshness and purity, the palate delivers loads of red berry preserves and spice flavors with velvety tannins to texture the long finish.

91 pts John Duval Entity 2012

Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2012 Entity has a baked black cherry and dried mulberry-laced nose with hints of prunes, Chinese five spice, black pepper and licorice. Full-bodied with plenty of spicy flavor, the baked black fruit flavors are framed by chewy tannins and it finishes long and anise-laced.

89 pts John Duval Plexus MRV 2013

A blend of Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier, the 2013 Plexus Blanc offers notes of peaches, spiced pears and apple tart with and undercurrent of baker's yeast and fresh hay. Dry, medium-bodied and with plenty of freshness, it fills the palate with toast and apple-laced flavors and finishes with good persistence.