

TASTE



MAX ALLEN

Steve Webber, chief grape-stomper at De Bortoli's Yarra Valley winery, phoned me about a year ago and invited me out for a visit. He reckoned he was making some pretty smart new wines and thought I should have a look. You could hear the excitement in his voice.

Now, most winemakers tend to gush about their latest vintage. Webber, though, is not the gushing type – at least, he never used to be. Hmm. I was too busy at the time to make the trip, but I filed his enthusiasm away under “must follow-up”.

Then, a couple of months ago, those wines Webber was so excited about appeared on my tasting bench. I unscrewed, poured, sniffed, slurped – and was on the phone immediately. “Um, Steve, do you mind if I come out for a visit?” **It's not as if De Bortoli's Yarra wines were ordinary before, by any means; it's just that they're so much better now. I had to find out why.**

Partly it's to do with vine age and broader winemaking experience. I tasted some absolutely stunning 2005 pinots from barrel, including one (which will be bottled next year as the 2005 Reserve Release) with exquisite depth, succulence and length of flavour from a vineyard planted in 1971.

I also tasted some fabulously complex pinots from vineyards that have recently gone over to organic viticulture. The fact that for the past couple of vintages Webber and winemaker William Downie have also been making a wine in Burgundy no doubt helps them understand pinot better.

Partly the improvements are down to something as deceptively simple as a sorting table. Every load of grapes from De Bortoli's Yarra vineyards – even grapes destined for the humble \$12 Windy Peak and \$16 Gulf Station labels – passes over this table during vintage and undesirables such as mouldy or unripe berries, leaves, etc. are plucked out by hand, meaning only pristine fruit ends up in the crusher and the vat. It's a technique common in better wineries in Europe, but rarely seen here. And it makes a big difference: the greater fruit purity – the varietal clarity – is the biggest change to the wines from the 2003 vintage onwards.

Webber's philosophy is simple: whether it's the ravishingly attractive, spicy, silky 2004 Yarra Valley Shiraz Viognier (released about now for around \$30) or the unusual but wonderfully pluggable, soft, creamy 2005 Gulf Station Rosé (\$16), he just wants to make delicious wine. He is. No wonder he's excited.

De Bortoli's Yarra Valley winery is at Pinnacle Lane, Dixons Creek; www.debortoli.com.au or (03) 5965 2271. ©

«THE WINE LIST

1.

2005 St Leonards Dry Orange Muscat \$16.50

Orange muscat is usually turned into sweet wine, but here it's been made into a lovely summer quaffer that is both exuberantly aromatic – citrus flowers and musk – and thirst-quenchingly crisp and dry. Drink with a chunky pork and pistachio terrine, some Cornichons and heaps of crusty bread. Info: www.stleonardswine.com.au

ANDY BAKER

2.

Jansz NV Rosé \$23

This wonderful warm-weather sparkler, with its subtle rosehip and redcurrant fruit and dry, biscuity palate, is one of two excellent Tasmanian pink wines released under the Jansz label; the other is the richer, more complex 2002 Vintage Rosé (\$37), available at the cellar door and through some restaurants. Info: www.jansztas.com

3.

2005 First Drop Little Rascal \$25

Now here is a first: Matt Gant and John Retsas (winemaker and marketer at St Hallett in the Barossa) have launched their own label with this crisp white made from arneis grapes grown in the Adelaide Hills. It's gently aromatic, like a waft of flowers on the breeze, and crunchy in the mouth – like biting into a cold nashi pear. Email: john@firstdropwines.com

4.

2003 TarraWarra Chardonnay \$40

I stuck this wine into a blind line-up that included both top Aussie chardies and some pretty schmick white burgundies, and it really stood out. It's quite savoury to smell – grilled nuts, toasty oak – but is gorgeous and fruit-saturated on the tongue – white peaches, nectarines – and the flavours linger beautifully. Info: www.tarrawarra.com.au

THE PERFECT» RASPBERRY SORBET

This smooth sorbet has always been a favourite of mine and is a real hit with guests. Sorbets work really well in one of those affordable ice-cream machines with a removable bowl (that's frozen before use). Bring ½ cup (125g) of sugar and 160ml water to a boil in a small saucepan over a moderate heat, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Boil rapidly for 5 minutes, then remove from heat and leave to cool. Meanwhile, in a blender or food processor, puree 450g fresh or frozen (thawed) raspberries and the juice of a lemon until smooth. Pass the mixture through a sieve to remove the seeds. Discard seeds. Combine the puree and the

syrup and chill for at least 30 minutes, or until cold. Freeze in an ice-cream machine, following the manufacturer's instructions until frozen. Store in a sealed container in the freezer until ready to serve. Best eaten within a couple of days. Serves 4-6

To make by hand, pour the chilled mixture into a plastic tub. Cover and freeze until partially frozen and ice crystals have formed. Process in a food processor until smooth, then refreeze. Repeat these steps once more. Freeze until ready to serve.

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