

AUSTRALIA TURNS TOWARD ELEGANCE

Aided by a series of balanced vintages, winemakers are aiming for more refined reds

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ustralia's best red wines continue to evolve toward elegance, not only with the expressive, harmonious wines that earned my top ratings, but also with affordable and widely available bottlings.



BY HARVEY STEIMAN

This style is due, in part, to the ripe but not over-the-top 2004, 2005 and 2006 vintages, which produced the majority of the wines reviewed for this report. But it's not so much a matter of alcohol levels. Shiraz, which produces the country's top reds, gets big and ripe in South Australia; alcohol levels are seldom shy of 14.5 percent, and some can reach as high as 16 percent. Somehow, good winemakers make them dance like a running back rather than crash into you like a lineman.

I reviewed more than 500 Australian red wines in blind tastings in our San Francisco office over the past 12 months. Fourteen of them, more than ever before, reached "classic" status (95 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale). As usual, Shiraz and Rhône-style blends dominate the ranks of the top wines. But recent warm vintages have produced some outstanding Cabernet Sauvignons, and even Pinot Noir is showing promise.

Clarendon Hills exemplifies this emerging trend. Though known for its single-vineyard Grenache bottlings, in recent years its Syrahs have become even stronger. Owner-winemaker Roman Bratasiuk strives for a European style to his wines, by hand-pruning and hand-picking the vineyards, fermenting warm with native yeasts and using extended maceration. He even calls them Syrah instead of Shiraz, the name that Aussies usually apply to the grape. The 2006 vintage seems to have played right into his hands.

The Astralis Clarendon 2006, Bratasiuk's flagship wine, is the top-scoring wine in this report (98, \$325). A better value is Syrah Clarendon Liandra 2006 (97, \$78). Velvety in texture and terrifically focused, this single-vineyard red sends out a laser beam of complex fruit and spice flavors that mingle effortlessly with fine-grained tannins through a long finish.



Clarendon Hills owner Roman Bratasiuk prefers to make his Syrahs in a European style.



Joining these at the top of the heap is Henschke Hill of Grace Eden Valley 2004 (97, \$625), but good luck finding this gloriously seamless, heady, single-vineyard Shiraz. Only 45 cases of that wine—and only 33 bottles of the 2003 (99, \$625)—were imported into the United States. These are extreme examples of the biggest problem with the best Australian wines: limited quantity.

Of the 88 wines that scored 92 points or higher, only eight were imported into the United States in quantities exceeding 1,000 cases. We received a whopping 2,466 cases of Mollydooker Shiraz McLaren Vale Carnival of Love 2007 (95, \$90), which has elegance to go along with its power. Mollydooker's smooth and generous Shiraz South Australia Blue Eyed Boy 2007 (92, \$55) and Two Hands' vibrant Shiraz Barossa Valley Bella's Garden 2006 (93, \$60) are the only ones that topped 5,000 cases.

But a significant number of more widely available wines are fol-

lowing the big boys' lead on style, and they deliver plenty of quality for the investment. The sweet spot for Australian reds falls around \$15 to \$25; of 158 reviewed wines in that price range, 43 scored 90 points or higher, and 60 more each scored 88 or 89 points. This range seems to produce wine after wine of substance and depth in a balanced, seductive style.

The polished Gemtree Shiraz McLaren Vale Uncut 2006 (92, \$24) is a good example, a fleshy wine that still has some restraint. Rosemount GSM Show Reserve McLaren Vale 2005 (91, \$25), a blend of Grenache, Shiraz and Mourvèdre, is generous with its plum and exotic spice aromas and flavors, lingering effortlessly on the open-textured finish. And the graceful 3 Rings Shiraz Barossa Valley 2006 (91, \$20) has a purity and focus that's beguiling. Peter Lehmann Shiraz Barossa 2005 (91, \$15) is round and generous; its lively cherry, tobacco and earthy spice flavors linger impressively

on the focused finish. More than 20,000 cases were imported into the United States.

Rolf Binder, who makes seductive, expressive reds under his own name, also makes Fetish, a mid-priced brand worth seeking out. Fetish Playmates Barossa Valley 2006 (91, \$22) blends Shiraz, Mataro (Mourvèdre) and Grenache into a smooth and decadent red. A 100 percent Shiraz from Fetish called The Watcher Barossa Valley 2006 (91, \$22) is supple, generous and deftly balanced to show restraint. Under his eponymous label, Rolf Binder made the Heinrich Barossa Valley 2006 (91, \$25), a black pepper-scented blend of Shiraz, Mataro and Grenache, with black cherry, blackberry and nutmeg flavors.

Other excellent values among Shirazes and Rhône-style blends include the Yalumba Shiraz-Viognier Barossa 2006 (91, \$18), which shows a purity and clarity to the blueberry, plum and white pepper. Razor's Edge Shiraz-Grenache McLaren Vale 2006 (91, \$13) is a gorgeous mouthful of ripe blackberry, plum, cherry and exotic spices, with hints of leather and brown sugar nibbling at the edge. And the Heath Wines Shiraz Barossa Valley Southern Sisters Reserve 2004 (91, \$19) plays out its coffee- and cinnamon-scented fruit with surprising restraint.

The recent warm vintages have done wonders for Cabernet-based wines. A record 29 wines earned 90-plus ratings, showing more fruit and less vegetal character than in the past. Yalumba The Reserve Barossa 2002 (94, \$125) and Jim Barry The Benbournie South Australia 2002 (92, \$100) show a savory edge and more open texture than Aussie Shiraz.

Limited quantities are a problem here too, however, with only two of those outstanding Cabernets available in more than 1,500 cases.

RATING RECENT AUSTRALIAN VINTAGES

Rating Shiraz Vintages in Barossa/McLaren Vale

2007	88-91	Best producers outwitted frost and drought	NYR
2006	88	Balanced wines may lack punch	Drink or hold
2005	97	Ideal weather made balanced, generous wines	Drink or hold
2004	94	Graceful wines with clear, pure flavors and open textures	Drink or hold
2003	94	Ripe, intense wines with excellent balance	Drink or hold
2002	90	Cool vintage made some tart, hard wines, but the best are magnificent	Drink or hold
2001	92	Hot vintage made the best wines fabulous; lesser wines are overblown	Drink or hold
2000	85	Uneven due to a hot summer and harvesttime rain	Drink
1999	88	Uneven due to late rains, but the best have intensity	Drink
1998	95	Rich, ripe and majestic; classic Barossa	Drink

Rating Shiraz Vintages in Victoria

2007	87-90	Drought intensified the ripeness	NYR
2006	87	Balanced wines may lack depth	Drink or hold
2005	94	Warmer vintage than usual made generous reds	Drink or hold
2004	88	Cool, crisp conditions made comparable wines	Hold
2003	91	Hot weather made richer wines than usual	Drink or hold
2002	84	Cool vintage made for a lot of tart wines	Drink or hold
2001	90	Wines have exceptional richness and generosity	Drink or hold
2000	89	Hot summer made ripe wines, but some are unbalanced	Drink
1999	85	Cold weather at harvest made some wines too lean	Drink
1998	95	Some of the richest, deepest wines of the vintage	Drink

Rating Cabernet Sauvignon Vintages in Coonawarra

2007	87-90	Small yields, but riper than usual	NYR
2006	85-89	Some wines seem green	Drink or hold
2005	93	Rich and generous due to warm season	Drink or hold
2004	91	Long growing season made wines of depth	Hold
2003	94	Ripe, intense wines with fine balance	Drink or hold
2002	84	Cool vintage made some tart, hard wines	Drink or hold
2001	90	Some wines taste green, but the best are fine	Drink or hold
2000	89	Rains stayed away, and the wines have ripe flavors	Drink
1999	90	Wines have pure flavors and fine balance	Drink or hold
1998	92	Strong vintage characterized by generosity and ripeness	Drink

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended. **Drinkability:** "NYR" means many wines of the vintages are not yet released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

SOURCE: WINE SPECTATOR

They are great values, though: Peter Lehmann Cabernet Sauvignon Barossa 2005 (90, \$15) focuses on a nice beam of cherry and savory flavors, and Green Point Cabernet-Shiraz Victoria 2005 (90, \$18) shades its juicy currant and blackberry fruit with hints of roasted meat and cedar.

Among notable new wineries to appear in the United States, First Drop and The Old Faithful made strong impressions in this report. Instead of New World or Old World styles, Matt Gant, former winemaker at St. Hallett, aims for what he calls "Next World" wines under his First Drop label: heady, complex and showing some grace. His Shiraz Barossa Valley The Cream 2005 (95, \$100)



Nick Haselgrove of The Old Faithful makes old-vine Grenache, Shiraz and Mourvèdre.



Matt Gant adds just a touch of Viognier to his First Drop Shiraz Barossa Two Percent, one of his "Next World" wines.

explodes with cherry, plum and cream flavors. His lithe, easygoing and generous Shiraz Barossa Two Percent 2005 (91, \$35), so called because it is 2 percent Viognier, shows agility and polish.

The Old Faithful, from John Larchet of The Australian Premium Wine Collection, bottles single-vineyard Shiraz and Grenache from some of McLaren Vale's oldest vines. The soft, supple Old Faithful Grenache McLaren Vale Northern Exposure 2005 (90, \$40), made by Larchet's partner Nick Haselgrove, hangs a pretty range of blueberry and currant over polished tannins.

More familiar wineries have been introducing some new wines or changing the focus to other wines they make. Yalumba's new wines include some high-end single-vineyard Shiraz, but the head-turners are its Hand Picked MGS Barossa 2006 (92, \$30), which delivers a plush mouthful of Mourvèdre, Grenache and Shiraz, and The Scribbler Barossa 2006 (90, \$19), which blends Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz into an expressive wine with distinctive tobacco and black olive overtones.

Henschke responded to worldwide demand for its flagship but limited-quantity Hill of Grace by upping availability of wines such as Mount Edelstone Eden Valley 2005 (92, \$110), a polished Shiraz with a velvety feel and gorgeous red cherry, pomegranate and mint flavors, and Henry's Seven Barossa 2006 (90, \$38), a blend of Shiraz, Grenache, Mourvèdre and Viognier, with distinctly peppery character carrying through from first whiff to final sip.

Penfolds' top three Shiraz bottlings are from different vintages. The current vintage of the most familiar Australian icon, Penfolds Grange, is from the 2003 vintage, which was extremely hot and made some over-the-top wines. Grange 2003 (94, \$250) managed to play against that tendency, with freshness to its blueberry, plum and mocha flavors in a beautifully balanced package. The Shiraz Barossa Valley RWT 2005 (93, \$82) is only a step back, with a lovely purity to the blackberry, dark plum and sweet spice flavors. Finally, the Shiraz South Australia St. Henri 2004 (90, \$42) is a real bargain for the cellar: medium-bodied and distinctive for its coffee-accented blackberry and black olive flavors.

Also arriving are some of the first reds from 2007, severely limited by frost and drought in South Australia and Victoria. Some '07s fall short of previous vintages because they lack vitality, but deft winemakers found a way to make outstanding wines. Besides Mollydooker, Two Hands got some 2007s out early, such as its Shiraz McLaren Vale Angels Share 2007 (92, \$35), a big, bold wine. Also look for Innocent Bystander Pinot Noir Australia 2007 (90, \$20), which has the juicy blackberry and currant flavors balanced with lively acidity and fine-grained tannins to show what Australia can do with Pinot Noir.

Australia has edged out France to become America's No. 2 source of imported wine. Its currency has gotten stronger against the U.S. dollar, reaching near-parity, and that will put upward pressure on prices, but not as severely as the euro has affected European wine prices. The bottom line, however, is that so many Australian wines have so much value built in, they may still look like bargains.

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