

A 'Napa Valley' In The Making

McLaren Vale in South Australia is a wine region bursting with potential to be a world-class appellation.

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Photo Credit: Chapel Hill Wine Estate

Besides having been an International Judge at the 46th edition of the McLaren Vale Wine Show in October last year, I had the opportunity to deliver a keynote speech to the Vale's wine community and the honour of awarding a wine, in my opinion, that stood out in the competition. The best takeaway from that trip, however, was the 12 intensive days of visits and encounters with the people in the Vale. Through those interactions and sharing, I have come to realize that McLaren Vale is a wine region bursting with potential to be a world-class appellation.

As I surveyed the surrounding and took in all the sights, sounds and taste of the Vale's wines, inevitably, the image and scent of Napa Valley, kept flashing into my sub-consciousness.

The Vale—from the general climatic influence and condition, geographical shape of the region, the passion of the vintners, wine styles, as well as sensitivities to the land they toil on—is strikingly similar to Napa Valley.

McLaren Vale is a small wine-producing region, close to the coast with a Mediterranean climate.

Comprising six sub-regions, from north-east moving in a general southwards direction, the wine areas are Blewitt Spring, Seaview, McLaren Flat, Willunga Hill, McLaren Vale and the southernmost wine area, Sellicks Foothill, which is a close proximity to the coast of Gulf of St Vincent.

Geographically, the Vale is flanked (West and East) by highly elevated hills gently sloping towards the flatlands and coast, with an opening to the Gulf of St Vincent in the southwest. Vineyards can be found dotted on the hill slopes as well as on valley floor.

Similar to Napa, the Vale is comprised of many small wineries, most of which are managed by families producing handcrafted wines with vineyards tended by passionate vintners and heaps of enthusiastic young Turks, individuals who are hugely proud of the Vale's tradition and wines.

Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon are the grapes that thrive in McLaren Vale, although vintners are increasingly keen on Grenache. Widely-planted white varieties include Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, with Viognier and Riesling being the next widely-planted. Interest is also high for Chenin Blanc.

In the pursuit for varieties that best suit the Vale's climate and soil types, it is unsurprising other Mediterranean varieties such as Tempranillo and Sangiovese can also be found there, with some plantings for Fiano and Vermentino.

In this region, the infectious enthusiasm and professionalism of the vintners, growers, and wine professionals can be felt by any wine lover who sets foot

on their soil. There is a huge respect for the trailblazers in the region, and many of those respected figures continue to communicate and work hand in hand with emerging generations of talented young winemakers—an encouraging development that will work excellently for the future of the region.

As far as unique individuals forming part of the success for a wine appellation go, McLaren Vale is not lacking in this regard. There is the inimitable, energetic and colourful Chester Osborne (d'Arenberg), who seems to be omnipresent, regardless of where the itinerary brought me. I can always sense his presence nearby. And then is Philip White of the famed wine blog, Drinkster, who is an outspoken intellectual who suffers no fools, yet was a supporting pillar and guiding light during my trip. There are also winemakers who are also closet rock and ballad performers, making the visit to McLaren Vale an intriguing one.

Other than the impressive quality of its wines, for the gourmand, McLaren Vale also offers ample choices of great restaurants and eateries from the hugely popular Central Market to the various cellar door restaurants in the wine land. Asian family-style eating places, focusing on Thai, Chinese and Japanese cuisine, are aplenty, and many locals and visitors can be found feasting in these eateries.

Then there is a regional food and wine culture with their fresh produce found in its farmers markets, such as the Willunga Farmers Markets. Taking a leisure walk along the beach is always a great idea in the Vale, as the beach is only a few kilometres away, with Silver Sands being voted as one of the finest beaches in Australia.

The U.S.P for McLaren Vale's success lies in the region; the natural beauty, the friendliness of locals and the wine fraternity, as well as the buzz in the wine land.

It is inevitable and certainly in the immediate future that McLaren Vale will emerge from the shadow of its neighbours to stand on its own and be counted as a world-class wine producing region. **WD**