

Revisiting Australia

Being the first wine-producing nation visited in the early days of his wine apprenticeship, **LIM HWEE PENG** updates on the dynamics and direction of this popular wine country is heading in the decades ahead.

By Lim Hwee Peng



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Pictures by Australian Wines & Brandy Corporation (AWBC), and Lim Hwee Peng



Handpicking at 'Hoodles Greek Vineyards', Yarra Valley, Victoria, Australia.

It all started with a wine challenge organised by AUSTRADE. It was also my maiden attempt at verifying my know-how and tasting skill learnt in the school of wine. My hard work and attention during that competition were duly rewarded with a winner's plaque. Along with three other worthy participants, we visited various key Australia wine regions to deepen our wine knowledge.

That was 14 years ago and I have since picked up more than McLaren Vale and Adelaide wines in my adventurous and humbling wine journey. Australia and its wines have also moved on to greater things, with a much clearer identity of their wine style. The Oz wines have also exhibited greater suitability of grape varieties to selected sites, as well as better understanding of the intricacies in crafting quality wines that not only satisfy the market demands, but also offer flavours that reflect the place of origin. Nevertheless, despite the seemingly huge progress made in a matter of decades,

what is currently occurring in the Aussie wine landscape is just the beginning of another evolution in its industry.

Competition

Producing approximately 4% of the entire world's wine production, Australian wines' popularity is unprecedented. Wines from various districts in South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia regions (just to name a few) can be found in major international wine markets, such as UK, USA, and the greater Asia Pacific region. Wine is expected to displace Australia's traditional exports of wheat, wool and beef as the nation's top farm export.

However, it is also apparent that Down Under is facing strong competition from Chile, Argentina, South Africa, and possibly India and China, all competing for a higher market share. Thus, it is only natural that Australia should not and cannot rest on its

laurels, but to keep on innovating and producing wines that will not only gratify the market's demands, but also set a quality that can continue to attract consumers as their desires evolve through years of exposure to various wine types.

Thus, the Australian wine authority has drawn up various strategies, including a new branding strategy to address these concerns. This new plan attempts to classify Australian wines into four main branding categories; namely Brand Champions, Generation Next, Regional Heroes, and Landmark Australia (see box story for details). It hopes that with such new initiatives, Australian wines will continue to stay popular in key markets, and that the wine quality will be able to please a wider spectrum of consumers internationally.

Global Warming

Global warming has resulted in a lack of resources that may restrict production quantity, as well as suitable sites for viticulture.

Australia's continental vineyard regions along the Murray River will continue to struggle with drought conditions and, like the rest of the world, the vineyard areas cooled by ocean breezes, such as the island climate of Tasmania, will be favoured as they have a better standing to weather the changing climate.

With the potential drought condition, grapes can be damaged if they ripen too quickly due to higher temperatures and a lack of rain. When grapes mature much quicker than usual, it results in higher concentrations of sugar, lower acidity and a higher PH level. The outcome of such growth is coarser wine, with higher alcohol levels and lower acidity, which are unfavourable elements for fine quality wines.

Such high alcohol wines will also lead to higher selling price in countries where wine is taxed according to its alcohol level, such as the newly introduced regulation in Singapore.

The only consolation for Australia is that such a phenomenon is not only affecting Canberra; other new and old world wine nations are equally, and some severely impacted by the climate change.

Seeking The Next Aussie Star

Without a doubt, Australian Shiraz wines are wildly popular; they have almost single-handedly put Australia in the limelight on the global stage. Oz Shiraz has seen huge demand in USA, UK and Asia, especially in Southeast Asia. Such success, however, has unwittingly become Australia's biggest challenge in its future growth – can Shiraz sustain the growth of Aussie wines popularity? Otherwise, what then are the alternatives?

A glance at history could probably answer that query confidently. Since the 1950s, Australia has grown from producing commercial fortified wines to the high quality still wines of today. Its past success with Muscat (for fortified wines) to Cabernet Sauvignon, and today's phenomenal success with Shiraz also demonstrates its ability to depart from tried and tested methods and courageously embrace the changing dynamics of the world market. Already, conscious effort and research are being carried out to seek out the next star varietal, as well as wines that can

sustain Australian wine popularity in an increasingly competitive wine market.

Cool climate style Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer, Chenin Blanc, Viognier, Shiraz Viognier, are some of the up and coming red and white wines that could possibly replace Shiraz as Australia's signature wine. Even the past-era Muscat fortified wines are being made with loads of freshness and balance, rather than offering a mouthful of grape-sugar. The more adventurous wineries have put on trial Sangiovese, Tempranillo and even Nebbiolo!

Thus, it is no surprise that the current effort to seek out the next Aussie wine star is a testament to the Aussie's adventurous and enterprising spirit that have and will continue to benefit the industry.

* THE NEW AUSTRALIAN WINE BRANDING STRATEGY

Unveiled by the authorities in November 2007 at a Singapore Wine exhibition, the four new Australian wine branding strategies were developed to provide an assurance of consistent and better wine quality at every price point. Hence, the four classifications are by no means a categorisation of wine quality, but an effort to allow trade and consumers to understand the various styles and origin of Aussie wines that have evolved through the decades and the continuous changes that are taking place. **Brand Champions** essentially refers to Australian wines that appeal through accessibility, ease of enjoyment and a strong premium brand of its products and Australia; **Generation Next** include wines that are produced through the drive in innovation meant to appeal to wine lovers who enjoy wines in a social setting. **Regional Heroes** refers to wines from somewhere rather than wines from anywhere; these Australian wines add and sustain interest for consumers by fostering a clear association between region, variety and style. Penfolds Grange and Henschke Hill of Grace are classic examples of a **Landmark Australia** wines. This category refers to wines that have gained high profile built on their inherent quality and have attained world class reputation.



Adelaide Hills

* AUSTRALIAN WINE PAVILION IN FOOD HOTEL ASIA, 22ND – 25TH APRIL 2008, CHANGI EXPO

AUSTRALIA, together with the local Australian wine importers, will be presenting a strong lineup of Australian wines at the upcoming Food Hotel Asia 2008. An Australian wine pavilion has been set up to exhibit some of its finest wines available in Singapore, as well as offering daily tasting session. An Australian wine seminar will also be organised and chaired by Singapore wine writer and wine educator - Mr Lim Hwee Peng, CSW, an experienced wine educator with certification ranging from Society of Wine Educators (USA), Napa Valley Vintners Association, as well as Burgundy and Bordeaux wine promotional boards. Lim will share, during the wine workshop, the primary purpose of those four new Australian wine branding strategies. The one-hour wine workshop will also be complemented by an Australian wine tasting session. Those who are interested may visit Food Hotel Asia 2008 website www.foodhotelasia.com for more details.

Wine Style

Is Australian wine a one-style, single-dimension fruit bomb wine? Or will it be able to step up its performance by producing elegant and classic style of wines favoured by some of the leading wine market and mature wine lovers?

Increasingly, Australia wine regions are shedding their image of a uniformly warm geographical area. Wines originating from a warm climate are portrayed as fruit-focused, with no balance and complexity. In my opinion, those two factors were outdated impressions, and such perception must be addressed so that the market gets to acquaint with and understand an updated image of Australian wines.

Cool climate wines, not surprising to many keen observers, can be had in Australia, with red and white wines from Yarra Valley, Mornington Peninsula, Adelaide Hills, Eden Valley, Clare Valley, and Pemberton, which is known to craft fresh and well-balanced wines without overwhelming the ripe fruitiness. My recent encounter with the newly-released Penfolds Bin 407 Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 depicts a cool climate wine style that reminisces of a serious Left Bank Claret, with a fabulous balance on the palate, as well as attractive fruit and freshness, all forming a classic old world style that will show well when paired with traditional meat dishes. Though the fruits used in the making of Penfolds Bin 407 were from different districts, most of it were sourced from the Limestone Coast, which includes Coonawarra and Robe where it enjoyed a lower temperature.

Even the typical Aussie Shiraz is going through a change in its character these days. Have a taste of Shaw & Smith Shiraz, not only does it offer balance in its flavour, the ripe fruit on the palate shows freshness rather than being loaded with new oak and dried fruit note. It also has sufficient weight but shows promises in unveiling its true self next to delicious fare.

So the next time you chance upon an Australian wine, regardless how familiar you are with the brand or region, do not assume that they have remained unchanged. Have a sip and you may uncover a gem beyond your expectations, and possibly another Australian icon in the making!



Wines by Australian Wine & Brandy Corporation (AWBC) and FOSTERS Asia.

* A SAMPLING OF FINE AUSSIE WINES

Tom Carson, winemaker of Yering Station, tries to make wines, that are stimulating, enjoyable, relaxing and to be shared in good company. That statement summarises the wines I have tasted under the **Generation Next** category. One of which was Carson's Shiraz Viognier 2006, while Yalumba, Eden Valley, Viognier 2006, Brown Brothers, Victoria, Tempranillo 2005, and Pizzini, King Valley, Sangiovese 2005 completes the lineup for that category. Those grape varieties are not known to be popularly planted in various Down Under wine regions, nevertheless, recent interest in exploring new planting has yielded some unique expression of those grapes that hailed from Northern Rhone Valley (France), Rioja (Spain) and Chianti (Italy) respectively. Special mention must be given to the effort put into crafting memorable northern Rhone style of white and red wines. The wines attract with their perfumed aroma, and lean crispness (for its white), and lush, soft, balance of their red counterparts. I personally like the Aussie interpretation of Sangiovese, with its freshness intact, yet oozing typical Australian fruit ripeness and structure. The Tempranillo, in my opinion, may still be a work in progress, but it would be interesting to see how it continues to evolve.

For the **Regional Heroes** classification, Mount Pleasant, Elizabeth, Hunter Valley, Semillon 2002 and Kooyong, Mornington Peninsula, Pinot Noir 2005 aptly demonstrated the ability for Australian wine region to have a signature wine style and grape varieties that suit the unique climate and topography of a certain region.

Cool climate seems to be a description many would not associate Australia with, but truth be told, there are micro and mesoclimates within selected Australia wine regions that could craft wines with classic and old world nuances, such as Clare Valley that is known for its crisp, lean and dry Riesling. The cooling weather is also ideal for Alsace variety, such as Pinot Gris. I had a Tim Adams, Clare Valley, Pinot Gris 2007 that displayed firm freshness, complemented with loads of tropical fresh fruit note; it is a Pinot Gris with flavours closer to Alsace than the Italian version.

Jacobs Creek Steingarten, Barossa, Riesling 2005 may not be as well known as Max Schubert or Stephen Henschke's signature wines, but it is a premium, limited production wine crafted by one of the most popular wine brands in the world. It is a connoisseur wines with seriousness and flair that could floor anyone doubting its quality.