Has Australia’s wine surge stalled?

By Andrew Jefford, wine writer in residence at the 2030 Wine Research Network and a senior research fellow at the University of Adelaide between 2009 and 2010.

Vineyards occupy a tiny fragment of the Australian landmass: less than 0.02 per cent of the continent. Their psychological importance, though, is wildly disproportionate to their size. The unparalleled export success of Australian wine over the past two decades has won more friends for the nation than sporting conquest, iron ore or marsupials on yellow road signs.

Moreover, that success was built on solid Australian values that owed little, apparently, to European models: pragmatic, scientifically founded winemaking delivering consistent, high-impact wine aromas and flavours. The wines were then sold with simplicity, directness and humour: how much less French can you get?

There were always dangers inherent in this approach. Making value the core of its appeal in a world where the power in wine retailing was becoming concentrated in fewer hands has proved painful, especially against the backdrop of an ever-strengthening Australian dollar. The direct and humorous approach can come to seem banal after its novelty wears off; most wine consumers prefer a little lingering mystery and complication, in particular for more expensive wines. These are two reasons why Australia’s export surge has stalled, and why around 20 per cent of the country’s vineyards at present are surplus to requirements. Prometheus seems to have morphed into Icarus.

Most interesting of all, though, was the assumption that the winemaking principles driving the Australian wine wave were eternal verities that the rest of the winemaking world would eventually embrace, for fine wines as well as simple brands. Australia certainly had useful lessons to offer; there remain many grubby, fruitless inexpensive European wines that would benefit from some robust technical intervention. For fine wines, though, the issues are more complex. Their attraction usually lies in a perfect synthesis of appropriate grape variety and propitious location; the winemaking challenge, assuming a good vintage, is then one of sensitive, attentive restraint.

I recently spent 15 months in Australia, watching and listening as the debate about Australia’s wine destiny, sharpened by crisis, unfolded. Should Australia remain, in Wolf Blass’s words, “a blending country”, or does its future prosperity lie, rather, in wines that reflect their regions and vineyards of origin, an approach dismissed by Blass as “absolute nonsense”.

Numerically, at any rate, the weight of opinion in Australia that I canvassed swings heavily against the Blass view. I lost count of the number of back labels that assured me that vineyards were primordial, or the number of winemakers who told me that their prime aim was to let the vineyard speak. They were sincere in this view – yet many of their wines still tasted forced and unnatural. The technical training most winemakers have received makes it hard for many to countenance low-acid wines of the kind produced in Europe and elsewhere, yet those are precisely the wines that existing varietal plantings in many warmer Australian regions would naturally deliver.

The customary Australian solutions to this perceived problem are either early harvesting or acid correction. The former subdues character in a wine, while the latter obscures it. The highly
mechanised harvesting process typical in Australia, moreover, is a brutal one (in contrast to modern best practice in Bordeaux and elsewhere), and the ferocity of Australian weather systems over recent vintages, combined with the country’s prolonged drought, have thrown up more challenges. There are inspiring winemakers who rise above this to produce unique and beautiful wines of vineyard or regional fidelity, but in many cases the challenge of producing true wines of place has been no more than partially met thus far.

There is everything to play for, though. The core appeal of long-term Australian regional-varietal pairings such as Coonawarra or Margaret River Cabernet, Clare or Eden Valley Riesling and Hunter Valley Semillon and Shiraz are all unique in world terms, and the stylistic developments I suspect are imminent will improve both drinkability and sensual appeal. Australian Chardonnay, a variety that not only responds well to craft but also adapts well to a wide variety of locations, is now among the best in the world outside Burgundy. Australia’s newer cool-climate regions, such as South Australia’s Adelaide Hills, the Canberra and Orange districts of New South Wales, Western Australia’s deep south and much of northern and eastern Tasmania, are rich with promise. Once Australian winemakers realise that nothing need be forbidden, and that naturalness in wine is not a soft-headed ideal, this supremely energetic winemaking culture may once again steal fire from the French.

Twelve of the best Australian winemakers:

Julian Castagna, Castagna: produces sumptuous reds Beechworth.

Larry Cherubino, Cherubino: virtuoso producing especially fine Shiraz from Frankland and Riesling from Porongurup and Mount Barker.

Peter Gago, Penfolds: has done masterfully progressive work for the “experimental” Penfolds Cellar Reserve series, available in Australian restaurants and at the cellar door, as well as making two of Australia’s defining Chardonnays: the multi-region Yattarna and the Bin “A” series from the Adelaide Hills.


Sue Hodder, Wynns: responsible for impressive recent releases from the best-endowed estate in Coonawarra.

Rick Kinzbrunner, Giaconda: Australia’s greatest wine craftsman, producing sumptuous Chardonnay, Roussanne, Shiraz, Pinot and Nebbiolo in Beechworth.

Tim Kirk, Clonakilla: makes seductive Canberra District Shiraz-Viognier, but the entire range underscores Kirk’s sensitive and sensual touch.

Ron Laughton, Jasper Hill: the godfather of Australia’s avant-garde: Heathcote Shiraz and Riesling of unusual texture and depth.

Jacques Lurton, the Islander: produces cunning varietal blends made with Bordeaux levels of care on a promising site on Kangaroo Island.

Gilles Lapalus, Sutton Grange: makes magnificent Shiraz with both texture and minerality from Bendigo.

Louisa Rose, Yalumba: sure-handed mistress of Riesling, Chardonnay and Viognier from Eden Valley and elsewhere.
Philip Shaw, Philip Shaw: the master of Orange: dappled Chardonnay and luscious Shiraz.