

# Wine Australia fact sheet

## Red wine - tasting notes



### **Australia's red grapes are amongst its greatest assets: after all, who could imagine a world without classic Australian Shiraz?**

Australia is blessed with abundant sunshine which enables our grapes to ripen to perfection. Whatever the vagaries of a particular red grape variety, there will be a part of Australia that can give it everything it needs. Even toughies like rustic Malbec or black-as-pitch Petit Verdot turn out a treat.

In general, the warmer the wine region, the more likely it will produce rich, full flavoured styles which many people have come to associate with Australian red wine. However, Australia also has cool climatic conditions well suited to red varieties which produce lighter and more delicate red wine styles.

The world's classic premium red grape varieties are all found in abundance in Australia.

Cabernet Sauvignon has several natural "homes" amongst Australia's wine regions. The famous Coonawarra terra rossa soils have produced excellent Cabernet Sauvignon for over a century, while few regions can match Western Australia's Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon for sheer stylishness.

In cooler regions the tricky grape Pinot Noir fits in nicely, while the versatile Shiraz, expresses itself wonderfully well in virtually all but the coolest regions. Several of the milder climate regions are also home to that eccentric and wonderful Australian speciality wine, sparkling red Shiraz.

Whatever you're looking for in terms of red wine, the chances are Australia will be making that style somewhere. Here's what to expect from the different varieties that Australia grows.

### **Cabernet Sauvignon**

Usually considered the noblest of red grapes, probably due to its pride of place in the history of old world classics.

In Australia, look for it in the medium to cool regions and the wines will be as powerfully flavoured, blackcurranty and full-bodied as you'd expect from anywhere. It's at its minty best in Coonawarra and Margaret River – the latter region coming up with wonderfully good blends with Merlot.

The Yarra Valley in Victoria is another Cabernet Sauvignon producer, making wines that are pure-fruited and elegant. McLaren Vale in South Australia and Mudgee in New South Wales also generate wines with black currant and berry characters with a hint of chocolate. All of these wines are rich and well structured to

benefit from further age in bottle, so it's also well worth cellaring them for a year or two.

### **Shiraz**

No other grape has such a uniquely Australian character. Try to copy they might but the rest of the world's winemakers will never capture that mulberry, spicy, slightly 'wild' flavour that can only be Australia's own.

Shiraz (the same grape as Syrah in France's Rhône Valley) was one of the first vine varieties to arrive in Australia in 1832. So at home was it on its new turf that plantings prospered and it wasn't long before the local population began to take it for granted. However, by the 1980s people had begun to realise how versatile it could be, its character changed depending on the region in which it was grown.

Every style emerged from elegant, peppery cool climate styles (Heathcote in Victoria) to more intensely flavoured spicy styles of Coonawarra and Margaret River to powerful and minty (Clare Valley), sweet and chocolaty (McLaren Vale), muscular, and ripe-fruited (Barossa), and leather and rich (Hunter Valley).

Shiraz, which has traditionally been blended in both cool and warm climates with Cabernet Sauvignon is also blended with Grenache and Mourvedre in warm climates.

In recent years, with the availability of increased plantings of Viognier in Australia, winemakers have increasingly blended Shiraz Viognier combinations. Typically, Shiraz Viognier blends have a perfumed aroma and softer tannins which make these wines suitable to enjoy while relatively young.

### **Grenache**

Another red grape variety from the Rhône, which is just as at home in Australia as Shiraz is.

Like Shiraz it was taken for granted for a long while – prized principally for its juicy rosé and fiery fortified wines. Today, with the discovery of some of the original old vines, first planted over 150 years ago, growers now realise that this grape makes just about the most luscious cherry and raspberry-filled wines possible. Renowned for their sweet ripeness, these grapes (which grow best in Australia's warmer regions) make wines which are high in alcohol and low in tannin. They'll warm you to your toes!



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## Merlot

Merlot is not a grape variety which you'll often see on its own in Australia.

When you do, however it will be full of attractive primary fruit flavours and velvety softness to make you wonder why. Merlot makes a perfect partner for Cabernet Sauvignon; Merlot adds the suppleness to Cabernet's stern, serious structure.

Fine examples of Merlot blended wines are available from the warmer inland regions, such as Riverina, Riverland and Murray Darling. Unblended Merlot is also being increasingly seen from these areas, where like the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale it produces a soft dry red often described as plush plum like.

In cooler climates such as the Yarra Valley or Margaret River, unblended Merlot tends to take on more savoury flavours with firmer tannins.

## Pinot Noir

What's a delicate, picky grape like this doing in a sun-drenched robust country like Australia, you might ask.

You'd be asking a good question. Pinot Noir is a challenge to grow in any part of the world. What's now emerged is a handful of Pinot Noir styles all Australia's own and a proud group they are too. Being a cool climate variety, growers in the coolest

regions are seeing great success; that's in regions like the Adelaide Hills, Tasmania, Mornington Peninsula, Geelong, the Yarra Valley and Great Southern.

In these regions the wines tend to come out strawberry / raspberry- fruited when young, then get progressively more mushroomy and savoury with age. The best styles of all come from vines with a little age, which haven't been harvested too heavily and from wines given a gentle maturation in oak barrels.

## Pink or Rose wines

Rosé style wines are made by pressing ripe, red grapes but leaving the juice in contact with the skins for just a short while so that the wines just acquire a pink blush. These wines are generally drunk young, while they are still fresh and vibrant.

They tend to be drunk chilled, an increasingly popular option during warm Aussie days, particularly among red wine drinkers who just can't bear the transition to a true white wine despite the heat. As Australian winemakers are using their favourite grapes such as Shiraz and Grenache for the wine with their tendency to produce more complex flavours, Australian rosés fall mid-way between whites and fuller bodied reds.

## Other red grapes

Fellow traveller to Shiraz and Grenache, Mourvedre (or

Mataro) was another grape used in Australia's bulk wines during the 1960s. Mourvedre has since been rediscovered for its fabulously rich, spicy old-vine/bush-vine wines. The Barossa Valley has some wonderful examples of this variety which should be treasured for their history and for their spice and liquorice concentration.

Cabernet Franc is mostly included in blends with big brother Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. This is a shame, because in its own right it's full of wild-strawberry and cherry fruitiness – a tad lighter in style than Shiraz but no less of a wine and great for drinking in warmer weather!

Petit Verdot is another grape frequently outshone in blends with Cabernet et al. Try it on its own and taste the inky black, sweet violet fruitiness. Malbec has a similar history but its earthy bramble fruit makes it very approachable as a single-variety wine in Australia.

Of the Italian varieties, Sangiovese and Barbera have had the most success in Australia. Barbera is perhaps the most suited to the country with its full-on plummy fruitiness and it is evidently at home in hot temperatures. Sangiovese's sour-cherry tones have proved more difficult to perfect but a few from the McLaren Vale region have shown good potential.

Tempranillo and Zinfandel are two other varieties with developing potential in Australia's warmer climate regions. It's worth watching for them as they are predicted to be future successes in Australia's red wine armoury.

## Sparkling Red Wine

Merlot, Cabernet, Malbec and Pinot Noir come under the sparkling banner but the real essence of Aussie sparkling reds is made from Shiraz. It has just the right amount of sweetness to make it fun, just the right amount of tannin to keep your taste buds tingling and just the right amount of seriousness to make it an excellent match for a meal. Don't forget you can age these wines too – they develop delicious berry and nut complexity with time.

## Red Wines For Ageing

Australia's finest reds, Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignons, Pinot Noir and top Cabernet blends are well worth cellaring. Don't get this wrong - many of these wines can be drunk early if you want to. However, these wines will offer a little more complexity of flavour in your glass if you wait a while.



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## Red Wine Vintages

Australia's sunshine quota is higher than most but that doesn't mean its weather doesn't vary from year to year. The cooler regions (where whites and lighter red wines grow best of all) often get a little more rain which is good for quenching thirst but can hold up the grape's ripening process.

Australian wine regions can suffer years of drought or lower than usual rainfall which also will create vintage variation. The best of recent red wine vintages (particularly important to note if you're looking for a wine to age in your cellar) are 2002, 2001, 1999, 1998, 1996, 1995 and 1994. The 2005 vintage looks like a "cracker".