

Wine Australia fact sheet

Red Wine - The flavour of Australia



Australian red wine is all about flavour and balance. It is wine that's friendly and upfront, full of generosity and warmth, tempered with elegance.

In the early days of Australian wine's renaissance in the United Kingdom, the phrase "sunshine in a bottle" was coined to describe how we managed to pack so much flavour into our wines.

Certainly sunshine has a lot to do with the ripeness and the personality of Australian wine. It is undeniable that basking in sunny summers and autumns is much more likely to tease the textures and flavours out of grapes.

But the true personality of Australian reds really stems from our 200 year old history of winemaking.

Firstly, our choice of grapes was simple. Our pioneers travelled light and their varietal selection was dictated by availability - Shiraz and Grenache were the two key red grapes introduced into Australia.

Secondly, the tyranny of distance meant that fortified winemaking became Australia's stock in trade. While table winemaking was practised by the early English settlers in New South Wales and Silesian settlers in South Australia's Barossa Valley, these wines were mainly for

domestic consumption. Despite the lucky few that did make it through the equator to win medals at 19th century exhibitions in England and France, in the days before sulphur dioxide the most reliable preservative was to add more alcohol to fortify the wines.

So, much of Australia's first century and a half was built on turning Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvedre (Mataro) into fortified wines and Muscadelle into Muscat. Winemakers used basket presses to maximise fruit structure and body – and they understood barrel maturation. Indeed Australian wine companies were known throughout the British Empire for their fine fortifieds and it is likely that a stirrup cup of a rich tawny wine fuelled more than a little Imperial fervour.

It wasn't until the post-war 1950s and 1960s when European settlers arrived and introduced Australia's beer drinkers to table wine, that winemakers changed direction.

It is now part of Australian wine folklore how Barossa winemaker Max Schubert travelled to Bordeaux in the 1950s and on his return decided that due to post-war shortages he would use American Oak and ripe, old vine Shiraz instead of French oak and Cabernet to create an intense wine with great ageing

capability. Penfolds Grange was born out of innovation and Australia's rich, full flavoured, robust red wine style was established for the next half century.

For most of the 1960s and 1970s Australian red wines were sourced from vineyards which had driven the now fading fortified era. Shiraz and Grenache were widely planted and most of the vineyards were more than a century old, made up of clones dating back to old Europe.

Although the Schubert recipe caught on quickly it wasn't until the 1980s that modern styles started to develop, more refined reds fashioned from better quality oak and varietals such as Cabernet Sauvignon. In fact, the blend of Shiraz and Cabernet became a signature Australian style. Australia also pioneered the use of varietal wine descriptions as key markers of flavour and style.

The 1990s wine boom saw more and more of Australia's young breed of winemakers travelling to the Old World to work vintage and learn about global wine styles. Australia's viticultural researchers also introduced a greater array of varieties and management regimes.

As a result the "palette" of Australian wine styles has broadened to include blends of Grenache, Shiraz and Mourvedre; recently imported

varietals such as Sangiovese (sometimes blended with Cabernet Sauvignon), Barbera and Tempranillo.

Regionality has also played a greater role in the sophistication of Australian wine during the past decade. While most regions continue to grow a range of varieties to meet consumer demand, it is now accepted that microclimate and vineyard selection do make a difference.

The Barossa has become well known as one of Australia's premier Shiraz regions – its old vine heritage and warm climate drive the rich fruit flavours that consumers love. But Australian Shiraz is much more diversified than the Barossa. There is also McLaren Vale Shiraz which is elegant due to its maritime aspect; Murray Darling, Riverland and Griffith Shiraz which are warm and friendly; Heathcote and Great Western Shiraz from Victoria which offer consumers spicy and more elegant styles; and the earthy flavours of Hunter Valley Shiraz.



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² The Coonawarra is famous for its exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon, driven by its unique soils and climate, but there is also seamless Margaret River Cabernet (often blended with Merlot) and exciting new styles coming out of central New South Wales regions such as Mudgee and Orange.

Then there are cool climate areas such as Mornington Peninsula, the Yarra Valley and Tasmania where great Pinot Noirs are grown and made.

Certainly that annual dose of sunshine, our ancient soils and clean landscape are responsible for the freshness and flavour of Australian wine.

The richness and balanced palate friendliness of our reds – and their surprising longevity – also comes from generations of experienced winemakers nurturing ancient varieties to create something that has unique Australian personality.



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