

Max allen writes about wine:

## **“LITTLE LEAGUES OF SOME EXTRAORDINARY GENTS”**

The Australian wine scene has suffered dark and brutal weather of late. But Max Allen sees rays of light in new networks of boutique producers.

(First published in the UK in WINE&SPIRIT, January 2007)

GOD, things have been tough for grape growers down here over the last few months.

First, in September and October, a series of sharp black frosts crackled across south-eastern Australia - from the Barossa, down through Coonawarra, Victoria and up into New South Wales - destroying the tender green growth in hundreds of hectares of vines.

Nature cruelly followed this disaster with hailstorms in Victoria's south, then raging bushfires in the state's north-east. Plague and pestilence weren't far behind: locusts chomped their way through (what was left of) a couple of vineyards, and the vine louse phylloxera was discovered in a Yarra Valley vineyard in December.

Nor did the New Year bring much relief: the south-east of the country (where most of Australia's vineyards are situated) is in the grip of a 'one in a 1,000 year' drought, and irrigators (which means most grape-growers) have had their water allocations drastically cut. And to add insult to injury, a 'once in a lifetime' freak storm hit South Australia's Riverland region in January with cyclone-force winds flattening 80 hectares of vines and causing \$5 million of damage. No wonder the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation is predicting the 2007 grape harvest will be 25 per cent down on last year.

On the face of it, if we're being brutally realistic, for the wine industry as a whole this fall in production looks like a good thing. The commercial side of Australian wine - which means the few-dozen, large, mostly publicly-listed wineries who dominate the industry - has been beset by an increasing grape glut and diminishing profits over the last few years, and a 'correction' to the supply/demand balance is welcome news.

But the fact is that the vineyards worst affected by the apocalyptic weather belonged mostly to the 2,000-or-so smaller-scale winemakers in Australia's cooler regions - and reduced crops are a disaster for them. Why? Because, the best are not only producing tastier wine than ever before, but are also selling everything they can make. There is no glut of great Australian wine - there's a shortage. And now, for the next couple of years there'll be even less of it go round.

Take the Clonakilla winery in the Canberra District of New South Wales. Winemaker Tim Kirk redefined the Shiraz Viognier blend in this country with the release last year of the 2005 vintage - it is truly one of the most beautiful young Australian reds you'll ever taste - and consolidated his position among the nation's top producers. People are clamouring for his wine: he could sell twice, three times as much as he makes. But in mid-November, a frost hit Kirk's Shiraz and Viognier vines and destroyed 80 per cent of the emerging crop.

See what I mean? It's enough to drive you to drink. But which one? For those of us who choose to steer clear of the big supermarket brands, preferring wines with personality, made by real people from grapes grown in particular vineyards, there is an embarrassment of riches in Australia right now. Not all the 2,000-odd smaller winemakers produce great wine by any means (much of it commits the worst sin of all by being bland and formulaic) but enough do to make us feel we're spoiled for choice.

Crucially, this new wave of small-producer wines is in a happy symbiotic relationship with the thriving on- and off-premise wine trade in Australia. There is a growing number of very good bars and restaurants, staffed by passionate, knowledgeable sommeliers; more and more savvy, well-travelled independent retailers - both real and web-based; a widespread adoption of direct marketing techniques - both mailing lists and online selling; and a burgeoning community of wine bloggers and writers - all these developments are helping small producers to reach their customers without them having to pander to the supermarket-owned wine retail stores which dominate here.

And importantly, it's not just the established producers such as Clonakilla (founded 1971) who are doing well: some of the most successful producers - in both a critical and commercial sense - are newcomers.

The success of Australia's small-to-medium producers in export markets such as the UK in the 1980s and early 90s was founded in large part by a perception that the winemakers were mates - knockabout blokes (and it usually was all blokes back then) who had a few beers and the odd barbie together when they weren't jumping up and down in vats full of Shiraz. It was, in other words, a great story that helped to sell the wines - and the wines were good enough to back the story up.

The encouraging news is that these networks of winemaking mates still exist. In fact, they're stronger than ever - and the wines are better, too.

Much of the excitement in the Barossa Valley, for example, is being driven by people like Kym Teusner (winemaker at Veritas, and producer of plush reds under his eponymous label), Dan Standish (behind the Massena label), Matt Wenk (winemaker at Two Hands) and Matt Gant (winemaker at St Hallett who also produces his own under the First Drop label).

A similar network exists in the Hunter Valley: Rhys and Garth Eather at Meerea Park, Andrew Thomas (Thomas wines), Jim Chatto (see the list of winemakers to watch, below), Andrew Margan ... And the Yarra Valley: Mac Forbes (ex-Mount Mary, now out on his own), Bill Downie (winemaker at De Bortoli, also has his own, eponymous label), Timo Mayer (winemaker at Gembrook Hill, also has his own ... you get the picture).

As well as banding together to promote each others' wines, these mostly young small-scale producers are also constantly tasting and drinking together - both their own wines (about which they are constructively critical) and the best wines from around the world. The result is a constant improvement in style and regional identity.

Their relative youth also means these new winemakers are extremely savvy when it comes to flogging their grog through new channels such as online ([www.firstdropwines.com](http://www.firstdropwines.com) catches the approach very well).

The networks extend out from the regions to other parts of the wine trade, too, both in Australia and overseas. It's become all the rage, for example, for sommeliers to make their own wines: brothers Tim Stock (a Sydney sommelier/distributor) and Nick Stock (a Melbourne writer/consultant) produce a Clare Riesling and Heathcote Shiraz under their own label, Twofold. And Melbourne sommelier Adam Foster -

inspired by working a vintage in the northern Rhone - also has his own Heathcote Shiraz, called Syrahmi. Needless to say, the connections within the trade that these guys have ensure a ready market before the grapes have even been picked.

Importantly, there's another connection: both the Stocks and Foster have availed themselves of the winemaking advice and experience of Sergio Carlei, one of Victoria's leading small winemakers.

This is far from being an unusual situation. Another winemaker with his finger in a number of pies is Sandro Mosele, based at the Kooyong winery on the Mornington Peninsula. As well as producing sensational Pinot Noir and Chardonnay under the Kooyong label, Mosel also makes wines for other projects including the Murray Darling Collection (see the list of winemakers to watch, below) and Greenstone, an exciting new Heathcote joint venture set up by Brown Brothers viticulturist Mark Walpole, Italian winemaking consultant Alberto Antonini and UK importer and MW, David Gleave.

This endless sharing of ideas, inspiration and support is emerging as one of the great strengths of modern Australian wine. No wonder so many talented big-company winemakers are leaving the corporate world and setting up small labels of their own.

Just look at the list of former chief winemakers from large Australian companies now making their own wines: Steve Pannell (ex-Hardys), John Duval (ex-Penfolds), Don Lewis (ex-Mitchelton) and, the most recent corporate refugee, Kerri Thompson (ex-Leasingham). The big advantage these people have, of course, is their intimate knowledge of where all the great vineyards are in the regions they sourced from in their previous jobs - a knowledge that is translating to some superb wines.

Another trend that highlights the widening gulf between the large-volume, commercial side of the industry and the small-volume, artisanal winemaking field is the increasing disparity between prices. As popular brands continue to be heavily discounted in the liquor chains and wine warehouses, a growing number of boutique producers are proudly releasing super-special, seriously limited reserve wines - or appropriately serious prices.

Exceptional (as in: worth every cent) recent examples are Stefano Lubiana's Collina Chardonnay from Tasmania (\$60), James Lance's 'Punch' Yarra Valley Pinot Noir (\$80), Kalleske's Johann Georg Shiraz,

from a tiny patch of Barossa vines planted in 1875 (\$100), Pizzini's Coronamento Nebbiolo from the King Valley (\$110), and Hanging Rock's Late Disgorged Sparkling (\$110).

It's tempting to see these top-shelf prices as a sign of the enormous confidence these makers have in the future of top-quality Australian wines - as long as nature is a bit kinder to the grape growers next year, that is.

#### TEN NEW NAMES TO REMEMBER

This is a selection of small-production Australian wineries and wines that have burst onto the scene in the last couple of years. By definition, some of these wines are available in extremely limited supply - even in Australia, let alone in export markets. But they represent the cutting-edge of what's happening Down Under, so they're worth knowing about.

##### Arrivo

Peter Godden, who works at the Australian Wine Research Institute, and partner Sally McGill, a wine importer, have an obsessive, all-consuming passion for Nebbiolo. Luckily for us, they acted on their obsession and planted some in the Adelaide Hills: the result is breathtaking in its varietal and regional purity - rosemary-spiked strawberries, slick juiciness and brick-dust dryness all in one package. [arrivo@chariot.net.au](mailto:arrivo@chariot.net.au)  
Ph: +618 8370 8072

##### Chatto

Jim Chatto is one of the new Hunter stars, and makes wine for a number of vineyards in that region (notably Benwarrin and the biodynamically-farmed Krinklewood). But his own wines - sourced from a number of places (Tasmania for Pinot, Canberra for Riesling, the Hunter for Semillon) are probably his best offerings: lovely, savoury wines with focus on texture and restraint and longevity. [www.chattowines.com.au](http://www.chattowines.com.au)

##### Freeman

The former head of Charles Sturt University's winemaking course, Brian Freeman, now runs a small vineyard in the Hilltops region of NSW, where he makes two fascinating wines inspired by north-east Italy: an intense, aromatic red made from partially-dried Rondinella and Corvina grapes, and a richly-textured white blend of Pinot Gris, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and the spicy grape Aleatico.

[www.freemanvineyards.com.au](http://www.freemanvineyards.com.au)

#### Deisen

Sabine Deisen is one of the lowest-profile of the new community of Barossa winemakers, but is producing some of the most fascinating and rewarding expressions of Shiraz, Grenache and particularly Mataro (Mourvedre) in a beautiful part of the Marananga sub-region of the Barossa using fruit from very low-yielding vines, and extremely hands-off, old-fashioned winemaking.

[sabinedeisen@yahoo.com](mailto:sabinedeisen@yahoo.com)

ph +618 8563 2298

#### Hahndorf Hill

This new winery in the Adelaide Hills produces some of the region's finest, most elegant and understated whites - particularly Sauvignon Blanc with almost mouth-puckering (but intensely refreshing) lemony tartness and refined, grassy/herbal fruit. Also, very unusually, the German varieties Trollinger and Lemberger are planted here, and a delicate, gentle pink wine is produced from them.

[www.hahndorfhillwinery.com.au](http://www.hahndorfhillwinery.com.au)

#### Murray Darling Collection

An excellent example of Australia's thriving wine networks, this project - making extremely exciting wines from non-mainstream Italian varietals such as Vermentino, Sagrantino, Aglianico, Negramaro and Lagrein - was set up as a collaboration between a wine bar owner, a winemaker, a vine nurseryman and a celebrity chef. All bases covered then, really.

[www.murraydarlingcollection.com.au](http://www.murraydarlingcollection.com.au)

#### Samuels Gorge

Irrepressible winemaker Justin McNamee left the large, long-established (now Lion Nathan-owned) McLaren Vale winery Tatachilla a few years ago to establish his own, characteristically quirky venture. The result is powerful, multi-layered, bombastic red wines that err on the side of generosity and warmth: the pick of them is the earthy, gutsy, complex-tasting Tempranillo.

[www.gorge.com.au](http://www.gorge.com.au)

#### Spinifex

Pete Schell and Magali Gely are producing some of the most thoughtful and purely delicious wines in the Barossa today: particularly exciting are the 2006s - wines like Lola, a fabulous, full-flavoured white blend of Marsanne, Semillon, Vermentino, Viognier and Grenache Gris; and

Papillon, a red blend of Grenache and the seriously underrated Cinsault and Carignan.  
[www.spinifexwines.com.au](http://www.spinifexwines.com.au)

#### Sutton Grange

French winemaker Gilles Lapalus has adopted biodynamic farming practices at this young vineyard near Harcourt, just north of Melbourne, and is making some sensational wines - particularly a cherry-fruity Sangiovese, superb dry Rosé, multi-faceted Viognier (all under the Fairbank label) and stunningly spicy estate-grown Sutton Grange Syrah (a clear statement of style intent).  
[www.suttongrangewines.com](http://www.suttongrangewines.com)

#### Vinea Marson

Mario Marson's winemaking experience includes stints at Mount Mary and Jasper Hill, both in the top echelon of small Australian wineries, so it's little surprise to find that wines from his own new vineyard in Heathcote are superb: the wines include an elegant Shiraz (again, labelled Syrah), a bone-dry but creamy Rosé, and a fabulously succulent-but-grippy Sangiovese.  
[www.vineamarson.com](http://www.vineamarson.com)

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[www.Maxallen.com.au](http://www.Maxallen.com.au)