

Max allen writes about wine:

“AUSTRALIAN BORDEAUX VARIETALS”

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COONAWARRA and Margaret River are far-and-away the best regions for Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot in Australia. But don't just take my word for it.

The Langtons Classification, published by Australia's leading auction house, is the closest thing this country has to an official quality wine hierarchy.

The 2005 Classification - the fourth since 1991 - featured 101 wines, 32 of which were Cabernets - either varietal Cabernet Sauvignons or Cabernet-dominant blends, usually featuring Merlot in the supporting role, but also in some cases starring Shiraz and/or Malbec, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot.

And of those 32 wines, Coonawarra and Margaret River provide the lion's share, with ten and seven wines respectively (the only other region that comes close is the Yarra Valley, with four Cabernet-based wines in the Classification).

Part of the reason these two regions are so good at producing Cabernet and Merlot is that have been specialising in the grapes, both as varietals and blends, for longer than almost anybody else.

While Coonawarra's grape-growing history dates back to the end of the 19th century, it was in the 1950s that Cabernet Sauvignon came to prominence - particularly with the superlative and stylishly-labelled wines from Wynns - joined, in the 1980s by Merlot.

The region's renowned 'terra rossa' soil (weathered red earth over deep, well-drained limestone), coupled with a climate remarkably similar to that of the cooler parts of Bordeaux, is perfectly suited to the 'Bordeaux varieties': the best examples exhibit great ripe mulberry and cassis fruit (often overlaid with characteristic regional sweet mint aromas) and firm, fine tannin, and can age well for decades, developing equally classic cedary characters.

Such is the solid reputation of Coonawarra Cabernet in particular that the region has managed to single-mindedly retain a high profile for the variety in a domestic wine market far more infatuated with Shiraz and Pinot Noir - as the planting figures show (see box).

In Margaret River, by contrast, Cabernet shares the spotlight with Chardonnay, Shiraz and the ubiquitous Semillon Sauvignon blend. But it wasn't always thus: when the first wine pioneers stuck vines into the gravely ground here in the late 1960s and early 70s, they were inspired by viticultural reports that had identified this remote part of Western Australia, cooled as it is by the ocean breezes, as being extremely well-suited to the Bordeaux varieties. So Cabernet is what they planted - Merlot vine cuttings being much harder to come by at the time.

The style of the early wines such as those from Cullen, Moss Wood and Cape Mentelle - very much in the elegant, eucalypt-dusty, fine blackcurrant end of the Cabernet spectrum - also happened to be very popular in Australia in the 70s and 80s, and Margaret River shot to fame.

In recent years, with an influx of tourists and 'lifestyle vigneron', the viticultural base has broadened. But Cabernet is still the benchmark Margaret River grape, especially blended with Merlot, producing distinctly regional wines - quite different from those in Coonawarra - with elegance but intensity, and that hallmark aroma: like walking through a forest of tall gum trees at dusk.

RATING RECENT VINTAGES IN BOTH REGIONS

2006

Quite a different vintage in each region: Coonawarra was warm and early and produced very good red wines; Margaret River was cool and late, and the wines are lighter than usual.

2005

Excellent growing conditions. Early signs are that this could be the best vintage in both regions for many years.

2004

Both regions had a very good vintage, and made more balanced, better wines than in 2003.

2003

A low-yielding year, warm year in both regions (with patches of heavy rain in Coonawarra), producing concentrated but perhaps not ageworthy red wines.

2002

An atypically late, cool vintage in both regions. The best reds are convincingly elegant, while some - particularly in Coonawarra - show green characters.

2001

Warm year, very good for reds in both regions, with Margaret River performing better, producing some classic wines.

2000

Good, early, low-yielding vintage in Coonawarra; Margaret River good but destined to be overshadowed by the stellar years either side.

REGIONAL SNAPSHOT BY GRAPE VARIETY

COONAWARRA

Total plantings: 5,500 ha

Cabernet Sauvignon: 3,190 ha

Shiraz: 1,100 ha

Merlot: 440 ha

Chardonnay: 385 ha

Riesling: 220 ha

Sauvignon Blanc: 55 ha

Plus smaller plantings including Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot, Pinot Noir, Semillon and Viognier

MARGARET RIVER

Total plantings: 4,250 ha

Cabernet Sauvignon: 850 ha

Shiraz: 800 ha

Chardonnay: 700 ha

Semillon: 550 ha

Sauvignon Blanc: 500 ha

Plus smaller plantings including Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot, Viognier and Tempranillo

(vineyard areas for Margaret River are approximate, based on tonnages crushed during the 2005 vintage)

THE CABERNETS IN THE FOURTH LANGTONS CLASSIFICATION OF AUSTRALIAN WINES

Coonawarra

Bowen Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra South Australia
Katnook Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra South Australia
Katnook Estate Odyssey Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra South Australia
Majella Cabernet, Coonawarra South Australia
Majella The Mallee Cabernet-Shiraz, Coonawarra South Australia
Orlando St. Hugo Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra South Australia
Parker Coonawarra Estate Terra Rossa First Growth Cabernet-Merlot, Coonawarra South Australia
Petaluma Coonawarra Cabernet-Merlot, Coonawarra South Australia
Wynns Coonawarra Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra South Australia
Wynns Coonawarra Estate John Riddoch Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra South Australia

Margaret River

Cape Mentelle Cabernet Sauvignon, Margaret River Western Australia
Cullen Diana Madeline Cabernet-Merlot, Margaret River Western Australia
Howard Park Cabernet, Margaret River-Great Southern Western Australia
Leeuwin Estate Art Series Cabernet Sauvignon, Margaret River Western Australia
Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon, Margaret River Western Australia
Vasse Felix Cabernet Sauvignon, Margaret River Western Australia
Vasse Felix Heytesbury Cabernet Blend, Margaret River-Great Southern Western Australia

The Yarra Valley

Mount Mary Quintet Cabernet Blend, Yarra Valley Victoria
Yarra Yarra Vineyard The Yarra Yarra Cabernet Sauvignon, Yarra Valley Victoria
Yarra Yering Dry Red Wine No.1 Cabernet, Yarra Valley Victoria
Yeringberg Cabernet Blend, Yarra Valley Victoria

Multi-Regional

Penfolds Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon, South Australia
Penfolds Bin 389 Cabernet-Shiraz, South Australia
Wolf Blass Black Label Cabernet-Shiraz, South Australia

Barossa

Greenock Creek Roennfeldt Road Cabernet Sauvignon, Barossa Valley
South Australia

Henschke Cyril Henschke Cabernet Sauvignon, Eden Valley South
Australia

Clare Valley

Wendouree Cabernet-Malbec, Clare Valley South Australia

Wendouree Cabernet Sauvignon, Clare Valley South Australia

Other West Australian

Houghton Jack Mann Frankland River Cabernet Blend, Great Southern
Western Australia

Pyrenees

Redbank Winery Sally's Paddock Cabernet-Shiraz, Pyrenees Victoria

Hunter Valley

Lake's Folly White Label Cabernet Blend, Hunter Valley New South
Wales

Tasmania

Domaine A Cabernet Sauvignon, Coal River Valley Tasmania

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