

MANIFEST DESTINY

For many, Australia's best wines – equivalent, in their minds, to its finest Shiraz – come from the Barossa. Although Chardonnay is set to overtake it in total tonnage, Shiraz has established itself as Australia's choice red varietal, writes James Halliday.

Australia's foundation stock of Shiraz was collected by James Busby during a trip to France and Spain in 1831, in which he collected over 500 varieties. While most cuttings came from the Botanic Gardens in Montpellier and the Royal Luxembourg gardens near Paris, 52 were collected directly from vineyards. All of the vineyard samples survived. In his *Journal of a Tour*, Busby gave a detailed day-by-day account of his trip.

There were two sources of Busby's vineyard Shiraz. From Roussillon, he obtained what he called Hermitage, which had been brought there "some years ago by M. Durand, from the celebrated vineyards of Hermitage". This was around 17 November 1831, and M. Durand, a leading vigneron in Roussillon, gave Busby a letter of introduction to M. Richard in Hermitage. Here, on Saturday 10 December 1831, Busby obtained 12 cuttings from the best portion of the Hill of Hermitage, which he catalogued as Ciras, or Scyras.

These two sources provided Australia with most, if not all, of its Shiraz. When

DNA analysis enables researchers to identify clones, we shall know how many came courtesy of Busby, remembering that both lots were *sélections massales*, possibly with only one clone, but more likely to have included more.

Shiraz took to Australia like the proverbial duck to water. It proved to be adaptable to every combination of soil and climate in which it was planted. It grew well, cropped reliably, and in warmer regions could reach 16° to 17° alcohol. As fortified wine production became ever more important, Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvèdre, both also obtained from M. Durand, became the favoured varieties for Port.

Through sheer good fortune, South Australia has never had phylloxera, and neither have the Hunter Valley nor parts of Victoria. Thus, while the majority of century-old – and some 150-year-old – Shiraz vines are in the Barossa Valley, and in lesser quantities in other South Australian regions, Tahbilk, in Victoria, has a vineyard planted in the 1860s, with no replacement of dead vines, and the Hunter

Valley has a number of small blocks owned by Tyrrell's and McWilliam's dating from around 1880.

Shiraz has so far always been Australia's most important premium variety. Muscat Gordo Blanc and Sultana have for long periods produced the most tonnes, variously used for fortified Sherry styles, raisins, sultanas, table grapes, table wine and brandy production. These lesser varieties have acted as a buffer for the peaks and troughs in demand from the wine industry proper, but – as a percentage of total grape production – have fallen continuously from more than 54% of the national crush in 1956 to 2.5% in 2006.

However, Chardonnay – another flexible variety – has thrown down the challenge, and projections in June 2006 by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics forecast that Chardonnay would overtake Shiraz in 2007, and increase its lead in 2008, with 494,000 tonnes compared to 448,000 for Shiraz. In the wake of the cataclysmic 2007 vintage, actual tonnages will be very

1 Shiraz on the domestic market				
Rank	Value*	Wine	Volume*	Rank
1	8.2	Penfolds Grange	14,744	103
2	8.0	Wynns Coonawarra	421,523	3
3	7.7	Wyndham Est Bin 555	495,519	1
4	5.9	Taylors	284,060	5
5	5.6	McGuigan Black Label	458,325	2
6	5.5	Annie's Lane	278,606	6
9	3.9	Jacob's Creek	348,035	4

Penfold's Grange proves that you do not need a lot of volume to generate value. Directions to 2025 has taken this message to heart and plans to repeat that success across a wider range of regional wines.

2 Shiraz in the United Kingdom			
Wine	Volume Rank	Sales Volume	
Jacob's Creek	1	209	
Lindemans Bin Series	2	207	
Yaldara	3	175	
Jacob's Creek	4	172	
VR	5	152	
Crest	6	149	
Lindemans Tollana	7	130	
Four Crossings	8	88	
Wolf Blass Eaglehawk	9	65	
McGuigan Gold	10	59	

Table 1: *Value in million AUD, *volume in litres

Table 2: Volume in '000 9-litre-cases

3 Contribution of Shiraz in tonnes			
Year	Shiraz	All red grapes	%
1956	12,400	41,400	30
1966	14,500	49,600	29
1976	72,300	177,100	41
1986	60,400	146,200	41
1996	81,700	246,000	33
2006	415,400	1,010,000	41

Table 3: Red wine accounts for 55% of harvest in Australia, bringing Shiraz's share of crush to 23%. With Chardonnay, the two varietals account for half of Australia's production. Cabernet Sauvignon has seen its share of harvest increase as well, but it remains a distant second.

different, but the longer-term trend will likely see Chardonnay with a lead, slender or otherwise.

Readers of American wine magazines might be forgiven for imagining that all of Australia's best wines - equivalent, in their minds, to its best Shiraz - come from the Barossa, which includes the Eden Valley, and becomes a region once you append "Valley" to Barossa. But Shiraz is grown in all South Australian zones.

And, indeed, if you were to substitute dollars for tonnes, and take ex-winery prices, let alone retail and secondary-market prices, it is a fair bet the Barossa would displace the Lower Murray - often simply called the Riverland - as the premier region for Shiraz, due more to the American market than any other.

Thus, as the world tries to play catch-up with Shiraz, it can never succeed. First, Shiraz has been more or less continuously planted since the middle of the 19th century, preventing any sensible discussion of what constitutes old vines: 30 years? 50 or 70 years? Secondly, new vineyards in phylloxera-free areas have the choice to either use root-stock or to plant ungrafted vines. Thirdly, the tremendous climatic diversity alters, but does not strip, recognisable and appealing varietal character.

Blends of Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon have been part of the landscape for many decades. From 1953 onwards, Penfolds Grange always contained a percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon, ranging from 1% to 14%. The 1963 was 100% Shiraz, and it wasn't until 1999 that the next 100% Shiraz Grange appeared again, followed by the 2000 and 2001.

Cabernet Sauvignon, however, was an extremely limited resource in the 1960s and '70s. Thus Penfolds Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon, whose first vintage was 1964, was



not made between 1970 and 1975, because the Cabernet had to be used for the rapidly increasing sales of Bin 389 Cabernet Shiraz.

As recently as 1990, only 31,000 tonnes of Cabernet were grown, compared with 274,000 tonnes in 2006, and Cabernet Shiraz blends outside of Bin 389 were not in big demand. The reason for the blend, once Cabernet plantings increased, was a structural one: to fill in the mid-palate of the Cabernet, the so-called doughnut.

These days the Rhône Rangers are in vogue, and in the Barossa Zone, blends of Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvèdre, in varying combinations, are both more common and more popular. Here the synergy comes as much from flavour as it does from structure, though both are important.

When one comes to mega-volume wines such as Jacob's Creek, the first release, and for long the only one, was a blend of Shiraz, Cabernet and Malbec. However the extension of the Jacob's Creek brand across all major varietals, and some blends, has diminished the importance of what was once the core label. Statistics tend to aggregate all the varietal combinations, five white and six red, and simply give a total. What is more, the original core red blend is now simply Shiraz Cabernet, with no mention of Malbec.

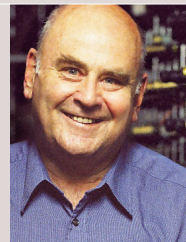
Cool-climate Shiraz with 5% co-fermented Viognier has been such a success that some are crying 'no more', and the wine shows are creating separate Shiraz Viognier classes. Here, Côte Rôtie is the inspiration, and some are trying to out-Guigal Guigal. The blend is also being used in warmer regions, with moderate success. The two leaders are Clonakilla, the pioneer, and Yering Station, with a pack of hounds from every corner of South Australia baying at their heels.

QUOTE UNQUOTE

» Better than high-octane aviation fuel wines. «

James Halliday

Penfolds Grange and Henschke Hill of Grace from the celebrated cool, low-yielding 2002 vintage came out within weeks of each other. The suggested retail price for Hill of Grace is \$550 and for Grange \$475. The secondary market may or may not decide differently; what is certain is that they are both remarkably beautiful wines, infinitely better than some of the high-octane aviation fuel wines from the Barossa Valley.



The domestic sales patterns are very different to those of the export markets, and are easier to follow. The top brands in the US pale into insignificance in the face of Yellowtail, The Little Penguin and the remnants of the Lindeman bin series. Once you look above the \$10 market, it is only Grange that may make a brief appearance in statistics such as these. The innumerable ultra-premium Shiraz, which have such a high profile in the States, are made in such small quantities that tracking their sales is very difficult because few exceed 5,000 nine-litre cases.

It is the same in Australia, where only a fraction of the top-rated Shirazs are sold through scanned retail outlets. Cellar door, web and restaurant sales are far more important, and for many customers, the only access.

These restrictions are frustrating for quality producers, for they suggest that all Australian Shiraz is pretty much the same. The range in style has in fact been blown wide open since the advent of the shift to cooler areas; the replacement of American oak with French; the introduction of Viognier, wild yeast, whole bunch components and deliberate earlier picking to induce fresher flavours with lower alcohol levels. ■