

The Wines of Australia

Written by Terry Connor

Monday, 12 September 2011 14:26

The wine industry in Australia is nothing short of huge. It is interesting and diverse. We are indeed fortunate to have access to the wines of Australia as they are plentiful and readily available throughout the Lowcountry.

Let's take a closer look at our "down under" neighbors and see what they have to offer. Wine from Australia is produced in two major areas; the southwestern corner of Western Australia, and the southern region of New South Wales and South Australia. Starting in Western Australia we see that there are five wine regions. They are Margaret River, Swan Valley, Pemberton, Perth Hills, and Great Southern region. For us here in the Lowcountry, wines that come from Margaret River receive the most exposure. Margaret River is a very active and popular wine destination. It features exceptional wineries along with excellent restaurants, tourist attractions, and beautiful beaches. This was not always the case. Western Australian wineries were isolated. It was very difficult to travel to this area. It became easier in the 1970's, when investment in wine production and tourism brought in better transportation facilities.

The Margaret River region was originally known for timber. Timber made room for Cabernet Sauvignon, which was planted in the 1980's, and it was a big hit. It became famous because the flavor of the wine reflected elegance, richness and clarity. Other varietals such as Merlot, Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay were planted with equal success. Chardonnay was produced with high levels of alcohol and oak flavoring. At the time this was done it was a true success. (The trend now is to remove the oak and to produce it with lower levels of alcohol. It is felt among producers and critics that this will lead to a higher degree of acceptance and a more refreshing drink.)

The leading wineries for the entire Western region are Cape Mentelle, Leeuwin, and Cullens.

We move east to the area known as South Australia and to New South Wales. New South Wales is the second leading wine producing area in Australia. It is also the most populous area and consumption of wine is ahead of availability. (This could be a problem; however being resourceful, the Australian folks are able to locate additional sources of wine.)

The most famous wine producing area in New South Wales is The Hunter Valley. (It is home to Rosemount Estate; more on this famous estate later.) Some terrific Chardonnays come from New South Wales, but clearly wines produced from their "old reliable" Semillon grape are the

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wines that prove Semillon is able to stand alone. In the past, Semillon was referred to as “Hunter Valley Riesling” (no reason given for the nickname). In modern times, Semillon from the Hunter Valley is used to produce four different styles of wine. The first is a commercial blend with either Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc. The second style is a wine that is made similar to Sauterne. The third style is a wine with mineral flavors and the fourth style is a dry wine which is bottle aged rather than in a cask. (Several wineries experimented in producing these styles of wine; however one of the wineries was Lindeman, which is a very familiar brand in the US.) The bottle aged style exhibits flavors of honey and carries with it a long finish.

Easily half or more of the wine production in Australia comes from the state called South Australia. There is a vast diversity in the climate in the state of South Australia. This allows for a wide diversity of wines. They range from Riesling in the cool climate of Clara Valley to the full bodied Shiraz from the Barossa Valley. The best known brands from South Australia include Penfolds, Grange, Jacobs Creek, and Yalumba. These best quality brands also co-exist with the mass produced box wines.

The wine regions pointed out above have very distinct opportunities that separate them from each other, i.e. by grapes, by wines, and indeed, by some very unique wineries. I will cover these differences in the next issue. We will see that Australia has come a long way from being a Penal Colony to a major wine producing country.

Winespeak

By the time that you read this article, the Labor Day Holiday will have passed. But Lowcountry weather is conducive to barbecue cooking much later in the year. So, with that in mind, may I suggest an Australian Shiraz with a Peppered Steak on the “Barbie.” If you are the steak and wine type, you will not be disappointed. Cheers!

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