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Australia's Benchmarks: Winery Profiles

By [Harvey Steiman](#)

BAROSSA VALLEY ESTATE

Shiraz E&E Black Pepper

Barossa Valley Estate, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site www.bve.com.au

Average case production 3,000

Winery production 70,000 cases

Current vintage 2003; 94 points, \$85, 2,000 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2002 (97), 2000 (95), 1998 (95), 1996 (97)

Begun as a cooperative of some 70 or so growers in Barossa Valley, BVE now is part of the Constellation Brands empire. Named after the original old-vine Shiraz blocks (Elmore and Elaine) that provided the core of the early vintages, the flagship wine often ranks among the best wines of a vintage for its seamless harmony in a rich, aromatic style. The old-vine blocks remain in the blend, joined by others in the same neighborhood with vines at least 60 years old, most on the warmer, northeast side of Barossa.

As a result, E&E has a distinctive personality. The flavors run toward dark fruits, often cherry and plum, with noticeable floral and spice notes, including licorice and, yes, black pepper. The texture in the best vintages is plush, but the wine seldom gets overly alcoholic or veers into the dried-fruit range.

Other wines of note: Ebenezer, made from Shiraz lots not quite up to the E&E level, now sells for \$35 and can top out in the low 90s score-wise. BVE's basic Shiraz, previously called Spires, has been renamed E Minor for the 2005 vintage (\$12).

JIM BARRY

Shiraz The Armagh

Jim Barry Wines, Clare Valley, South Australia

Web site www.jimbarr.com

Average case production 500

Winery production 70,000 cases

Current vintage 2004; 92 points, \$140, 75 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2001 (95), 2000 (94), 1997 (95)

Clare may be best known for its Rieslings, but in the warm north end of the valley, one vineyard produces a stunning Shiraz. The Armagh, made from 8 acres of Shiraz vines planted in 1959, dry-grown on gravelly soil, stands out for the kind of balance that many Australian Shiraz bottlings aspire to but seldom achieve.

First released in 1985, the wine consistently shows a purity of plum and cherry flavors, often shaded with distinctive hints of white pepper, licorice and exotic spices such as cardamom, all wrapped in a plush blanket of tannins. Managing partner Peter Barry credits mature vines that yield less than 2 tons per acre. He and his brothers Mark, the winemaker, and John, the viticulturist, inherited the company from their father, Jim.

"Working with Shiraz from Armagh is a privilege," says Peter Barry, "and we take it seriously." So much so that Barry decided not to release a 2003 Armagh because it was not up to par. Preview tastings of 2005 and 2006, however, suggest they might be the best yet.

Other wines of note: The McRae Wood Shiraz (\$37), made from vines surrounding the Armagh, can score in the outstanding range. Florita Riesling (\$30) has the nerve and mineral qualities typical of Clare. The entry-level Cover Drive Cabernet (\$17) and Lodge Hill Shiraz (\$17) often approach 90 points.

BETTS & SCHOLL

Grenache The Chronique

Vinified at Rusden Winery, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site www.bettsandscholl.com

Average case production 300

Winery production 1,500 cases

Current vintage 2005; 92 points, \$39, 300 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (92), 2003 (92)

Americans Richard Betts, sommelier at Montagna, the *Wine Spectator* Grand Award-winning restaurant at the Little Nell in Aspen, Colo., and Dennis Scholl, a Miami-based collector of contemporary art, teamed up in 2001 to start the Betts & Scholl label and make Grenache in Australia. They have since added projects in the Rhône and California, but the flagship wine is The Chronique, a Grenache of arresting presence and vivid flavor. Australian Grenache seldom gets this much finesse to go along with power.

Betts and Scholl buy grapes from growers with old vines in Barossa. Betts flies to Australia four or five times a year to work with winemaker Christian Canute, who shepherds the wines through his Rusden winery. In tasting what the individual vineyards did in 2003, Betts and Canute kept going back to one lot, entranced by its floral, creamy berry flavors. "It was chronic," Betts says. Hence the name.

Other wines of note: The regular Grenache (\$29), its label adorned with a witty sketch of a supine dancer, has remarkable grace and meaty plum flavors. A Shiraz called Black Betty (\$69) debuted with the 2005 vintage, vibrant and balanced with racy acidity. An Eden Valley Riesling (\$29) brims with distinctive stone-fruit character on a dry frame.

ROLF BINDER

Shiraz Hanisch

Rolf Binder Wines, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site www.veritaswinery.com

Average case production 400

Winery production 24,000 cases

Current vintage 2005; 94 points, \$108, 112 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (93), 2002 (92)

Rolf Binder grew up in his parents' Barossa Valley winery, then called Veritas. After studying at nearby Roseworthy College and working a couple of vintages in Germany, he took over as the winemaker in 1982, swiftly converting the label from fortified wines to dry table wines.

Rolf's parents had bought a parcel of land adjacent to their home vineyard from "Punch" Hanisch in 1968. They planted Shiraz on it, and one section consistently produced the best wines in the cellar. It's barely large enough to make 400 cases of wine in a good vintage, but it supplies the winery's flagship red, named after the guy who sold the Binders the land.

The supple wine's beautifully delineated blueberry and plum fruit, with delicately spicy overtones, sails over a creamy texture. It is the very definition of modern Barossa Shiraz, generous but not overripe, approachable but serious enough to merit cellaring.

Other wines of note: Another high-end Shiraz, Heysen (\$60), has more elegance and often a minty note. Heinrich (\$26), a blend of Shiraz, Mataro and Grenache, is considerably lighter on its feet. A fan of Mataro, Binder named his Shiraz-Mataro blend Hubris (\$60). It can be gamy.

BINDI

Chardonnay Quartz

Bindi Wine Growers, Macedon, Victoria

Web site *NA*

Average case production *150*

Winery production *2,150 cases*

Current vintage *2005; 92 points, \$55, 150 cases made*

Best recent vintages (pts.) *NA*

When Michael Dhillon kicks at the soil under his vines, halfway up a slope between a lake and a eucalyptus forest in the Macedon Ranges of Central Victoria, the dirt actually sparkles from bits of quartz scattered in broad swaths through the soil.

The son of founder Bill Dhillon, Michael has been making the wine for 12 years. He discovered that the parts of the vineyard with the highest concentrations of quartz in the soil make a Chardonnay richer in texture and riper in flavor than the rest, while Central Victoria's characteristic zingy acidity adds to the wine's juiciness.

He bottles the product of these vines as Quartz, and danged if it doesn't have a strong minerality to it. Composition, the other Chardonnay, is steelier and less expressive. Both wines age beautifully. Although I have tasted vintages back to the debut 1988, the wines were not available in the United States until 2005.

Other wines of note: Chardonnay Composition (\$40), from the rest of the vineyard, is more tart and angular than Quartz. Three Pinot Noirs, similarly priced, show bright flavors on a silky, vibrant frame. The best is Block 5, made in minuscule quantities.

WOLF BLASS

Shiraz Platinum Label

Wolf Blass, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site *www.wolfblass.com.au*

Average case production *1,400*

Winery production *3.3 million cases*

Current vintage *2004; 93 points, \$85, 415 cases imported*

Best recent vintages (pts.) *2003 (92), 2002 (94), 1999 (93)*

Anyone who says big corporations cannot achieve great wines hasn't tasted Wolf Blass Platinum Label. From the long roster of vineyards owned and managed by the Foster's Wine Group, which owns the Wolf Blass brand, chief winemaker Chris Hatcher and Wolf Blass winemaker Caroline Dunne identified specific vineyards in Barossa and Eden valleys that deliver mouth-coddling textures and ripe flavors. They aimed for a no-holds-barred Shiraz with an overall sense of balance.

They found their core vineyard in Hutton Vale. Located in the hills of Eden Valley, its grapes have a refreshing acidity, achieving ripe flavors without dried-fruit character. Blending Hutton Vale fruit with Barossa grapes makes the wine what it is—a fleshy Shiraz notable for its elegance and refinement.

Other wines of note: Black Label (\$70), a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz from various points in South Australia, can approach the Platinum in quality. At moderate prices, the Gold Label series (\$25) includes Chardonnays and Rieslings of real subtlety. The value-priced Yellow Label series (\$12) often excels with Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon.

CLARENDON HILLS

Syrah Astralis

Clarendon Hills Winery, Clarendon Hills, McLaren Vale, South Australia

Web site *www.clarendonhills.com.au*

Average case production *1,000*

Winery production *16,000 cases*

Current vintage *2005; 96, \$325, 500 cases imported*

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (97), 2003 (95), 2002 (95), 1999 (95)

In the late 1980s, Roman Bratasiuk drove the hilly back roads of Clarendon Hills looking for old vines, knocking on doors to buy Grenache and Syrah grapes from growers who often had no other market for them. He made his first vintage in 1991, and the next year he began keeping the vineyards' wines separate to emphasize their individuality, a rare approach in Australia at the time.

Grenache was the standout early on, and no one else was making rich, supple, ageworthy reds from the grape in Australia. But the wine that consistently impressed Bratasiuk most was a Syrah (Bratasiuk disdains the Australian variant Shiraz). The Astralis vineyard bottling has been made since 1994 from vines planted in the 1930s on their own roots. With its label depicting the Southern Cross constellation, it has been a hot ticket from the first.

Today, Clarendon Hills bottles 17 wines—six Grenaches, eight Syrahs, three Cabernets and a Merlot. But the wine that rises to the top, year in and year out, is Astralis. Deep, powerful and dense, it plays dark fruit flavors, often shaded with hints of chocolate and espresso, against a silken texture. A big wine, it feels supple and elegant in the best vintages.

Other wines of note: The class act of the single-vineyard Grenache bottlings is usually Romas (\$100), made from the top rows of Blewitt Springs Vineyard, although they all usually rate outstanding. So do the Syrahs, with Brookman vineyard a standout. A new Merlot from Brookman (first vintage 2005; \$60) is a real head-turner.

DEVIL'S LAIR**Chardonnay Margaret River**

Devil's Lair, Margaret River, Western Australia

Web site www.devils-lair.com

Average case production 4,500 cases

Winery production 9,000 cases

Current vintage 2005; 91 points, \$23, 351 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2003 (93), 2002 (91)

Phil Sexton planted a vineyard just over the hill from Leeuwin Estate in 1980, and in 1996 sold it to Southcorp (now Foster's), which pretty much left it alone. Good call. The vineyard produces a fleshy, impeccably balanced white wine that has pear and pineapple fruit, often with the hint of quince that's typical of Margaret River, while a lime-lemon tang lurks in the background. It has perennially rated 90 or more points.

Winemaker Stuart Pym had managed Voyager Estate (another outstanding Chardonnay producer in the region) and worked vintages in Bordeaux and Piedmont before returning to Margaret River, where his family has had a winery since 1983. He arrived at Devil's Lair in 2000, and maintained the same low yields and hands-off winemaking initiated by Sexton and continued by Janice McDonald, Pym's predecessor.

Other wines of note: A Cabernet-based red, called simply Devil's Lair (\$23), tends to have a green streak to its ripe fruit flavors, but the supple texture can make it pleasing.

DOMAINE TERLATO & CHAPOUTIER**Syrah Malakoff**

Domaine Terlato & Chapoutier, Heathcote, Victoria

Web site www.mchapoutieraustralia.com

Average case production 1,500

Winery production 5,000 cases

Current vintage 2005; 93 points, \$40, 1,500 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (92)

In 1997, Michel Chapoutier, who makes some of the best Syrah wines in the Northern Rhône, trained his sights on Australia, which has made Shiraz its calling card. He partnered with Terlato Wines in the United States, Ron Laughton in Heathcote and Trevor Mast in Pyrenees, planting

vineyards in those Australian regions and his own vineyard, *Domaine Tournon*, in Mount Benson, in South Australia's Limestone Coast. Winemaker Benjamin Darnault runs the cellar in Heathcote, where all the wines are made.

The star is the Pyrenees vineyard, dubbed "Lieu Dit Malakoff." The first few vintages suggest that "lieu dit," the French locution for a vineyard that's not a *premier* or *grand cru*, may have been an underestimation; this site could emerge as a *grand cru* equivalent. Unlike other Aussie reds, Malakoff emphasizes the sort of vivid black fruit and mineral character against an open texture that's typical of Hermitage. And it's long, long, long.

Other wines of note: Shiraz-Viognier Victoria (\$25) is made from the Heathcote and Pyrenees fruit; it's a supple wine that makes the Viognier's presence felt. Mount Benson Shiraz (\$40) has been a bit too gamy in the past, but upcoming vintages seem better.

ELDERTON

Shiraz Command Single Vineyard

Elderton Wines, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site www.eldertonwines.com.au

Average case production 2,200

Winery production 42,500 cases

Current vintage 2003; 94 points, \$78, 1,100 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2002 (93); 2001 (96), 2000 (97), 1999 (94), 1998 (94)

This big, rich Shiraz with classic Barossa cherry and exotic spice flavors comes from vines planted by Samuel Elderton Tolley in the early 1900s in the center of Barossa Valley. The Ashmead family bought the 72-acre vineyard in the late 1970s and bottled the first Command Shiraz in 1984, but it wasn't until the mid-1990s that Command hit its stride as the bold, opulent wine it is now.

Now surrounded by the burgeoning town of Nuriootpa, the vineyard sits on river silt soils over red and brown earth and limestone. The vines in the Command block yield less than 2 tons per acre. The wines get 18 months in a mix of American and French oak puncheons, then 12 months in older oak barrels before being bottled.

Until 2003 when the Ashmeads completed their new winery at the vineyard's edge, they had all their wines made in contract facilities. Brothers Cameron and Allister Ashmead run the company now and expect that extra attention in their own building will make Command even more supple and detailed in flavor.

Other wines of note: The standard Shiraz Barossa Valley (\$30) often tops 90 points, and the ripe, generous Cabernet Sauvignon Barossa Valley Ashmead Single Vineyard (\$70) has broken the 90-point barrier as well. Ode to Lorraine (\$42), a unique blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Merlot, displays real personality, as does the Sauternes-like Sémillon Riverina Botrytis (\$18/375ml).

GROSSET

Riesling Polish Hill

Grosset Wines, Clare Valley, South Australia

Web site www.grosset.com.au

Average case production 3,000

Winery production 9,000 cases

Current vintage 2006; 92 points, \$33, 150 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2005 (93), 2004 (92), 2003 (92), 2002 (92)

Australian Riesling stands out from the world's other notable versions because of its dry, steely style. It's pretty good when the flavors center on lime and apple, but the wines are really something special when they display mineral character. Jeffrey Grosset planted his Polish Hill vineyard in 1966 on a U-shaped piece of land layered with shale, and the mature vines make a Riesling of distinct minerality.

Typically lean and austere, a youthful Grosset Polish Hill demands close attention to tease out the

aromas of exotic citrus, stone fruit and something resembling hot sun on slate. But this is a wine to age; at eight to 10 years, it spills out mature flavors with real generosity.

Although he's won awards as a winemaker, Jeffrey Grosset will be the first to say he's more of a vineyard guy. "I don't like to use any winemaking tricks," he says. "Just stay out of the way and let the grapes express themselves."

Other wines of note: The Watervale Riesling (\$29), from grapes grown in a different part of Clare, is more forward and approachable when young. The Chardonnay (\$36), a generous, round style made from Adelaide Hills grapes, reaches the outstanding level most vintages.

HENSCHKE

Shiraz Hill of Grace

C.A. Henschke & Co., Eden Valley, South Australia

Web site www.henschke.com.au

Average case production 1,400

Winery production 50,000 cases

Current vintage 2001; 95, \$375, 70 cases imported (2002 to be released Oct. 2007)

Best recent vintages (pts.) 1998 (94), 1997 (95), 1996 (97)

Stephen Henschke's family arrived in Eden Valley from Germany in the mid-1800s. About the same time, a neighboring German immigrant planted a vineyard across from a lovely little fieldstone church called Gnadenberg (German for "hill of grace"). Stephen's great-grandfather acquired the property in 1891, but it wasn't until 1958 that his father, Cyril, bottled the Shiraz we know as Hill of Grace. Several of the original rows remain, tended by Stephen's wife, viticulturist Prue; her sprawling, gnarled and twisted plants are the heart and soul of this remarkable wine.

At its best, Hill of Grace wraps its rich berry, black fruit, dusky spice and mineral flavors into a big, round, utterly seamless package. After 10 years, it has aged into something even more refined, and it can keep going for another 20 to 30 years, perhaps more.

Henschke hit a significant speed bump around 1999 and 2000, when *brettanomyces*, a spoilage yeast, took the gloss off the red wines, including Hill of Grace. But they eliminated the problem, and today's wines are impeccable.

Other wines of note: The other Eden Valley Shiraz, Mount Edelstone (\$100), comes from a hillside vineyard and in some vintages can challenge Hill of Grace for supremacy. Among the whites, the Julius Riesling (\$27) deftly balances pineapple and mineral flavors. Cabernet Sauvignon Cyril Henschke (\$100) weaves herbal flavors with ripe fruit seamlessly.

JASPER HILL

Shiraz Georgia's Paddock

Jasper Hill Vineyard, Heathcote, Victoria

Web site www.jasperhill.com

Average case production 1,000

Winery production 3,000 cases

Current vintage 2005; 91, \$75, 64 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (90), 2002 (92), 2001 (92), 2000 (92)

Ron and Elva Laughton planted the 30-acre Georgia's Paddock vineyard, adjacent to their Heathcote home, in 1975. They believed they could make a special wine from vines grown on their own roots in the deep red soils of one of the warmer regions in cool-climate Victoria. Today, they farm their vineyards biodynamically, with no irrigation, and hand-prune; the vineyard produces minuscule yields, less than 1.5 tons per acre.

Georgia's turns out to be a special spot, making wines of real intensity with flavors that grab your attention. Berries, cherries and often black olive and black pepper notes play against racy acidity and a mild tannic grip when the wines are young. They mature, after about 10 years, into something remarkably graceful.

Other wines of note: A second vineyard less than a mile away, Emily's Paddock makes a Shiraz-Cabernet Franc (\$110) with distinctive spicy character. It also needs cellaring.

KAESLER

Shiraz Old Bastard

Kaesler Vineyards & Winery, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site www.kaesler.com.au

Average case production 500 cases

Winery production 25,000 cases

Current vintage 2004; 95 points, \$135, 500 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2002 (94), 2001 (96)

Kaesler's history goes back to 1893, when a family of Silesian immigrants by that name planted vineyards in the heart of Barossa Valley. Over the years the property was broken up, but a chance meeting in Bordeaux between Australian winemaker Reid Bosward and Swiss banker Edouard Peter led to the partnership that bought 60 acres of the remaining parcels in 1999 and 2001. Old Bastard is made from the three surviving acres of the original 1893 Shiraz vines.

"The vineyard had been farmed to within an inch of its life," sighs Bosward. "We cut way back on irrigation and reduced the yield by 40 percent to get the intensity we wanted." What distinguishes Old Bastard is that it balances the intensity and richness of classic Barossa plum and fruitcake character with refined tannins and elegance from judicious acidity. Even in a hot, challenging vintage like 2003, Old Bastard delivers flavors that feel fresh, not dried or stewed, which tells you a lot about the quality in a good growing season.

Other wines of note: Two other Shiraz-based wines, The Bogan (\$58) and Old Vine (\$58), offer similar power if not quite the refinement of Old Bastard. Stonehorse GSM (\$19), a blend of Grenache, Shiraz and Mourvèdre, delivers crowdpleasing fruit and polish.

LEEWIN ESTATE

Chardonnay Art Series

Leeuwin Estate, Margaret River, Western Australia

Web site www.leeuwinestate.com.au

Average case production 3,000

Winery production 60,000 cases

Current vintage 2003; 94 points, \$80, 400 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2002 (96), 2001 (98), 1999 (95)

On paper, Margaret River should not produce great Chardonnay. Its moderate climate is too warm, and the predominant Mendoza clone, locally known as Gin Gin, makes undistinguished wine elsewhere. But here on the western edge of the continent, where the temperate Indian Ocean meets the cold Southern Ocean, magic happens.

A great Leeuwin Chardonnay is seamless and seductive, a cascade of pear, pineapple, guava, nectarine and subtle spice aromas and flavors, amazingly refined, long and built to last. Like a great white Burgundy, it hits its stride at about 10 years old. The track record is there, starting with the debut 1980. The earliest vintages still feel complete.

Leeuwin's vineyards, planted in the 1970s by owners Denis and Tricia Horgan with advice from Robert Mondavi, roll over a beautiful forested landscape less than 4 miles from the sea. The wines from gravelly Block 20, the core of the blend, always have finesse and need a year of lees contact in barrel to develop their distinctive texture.

Other wines of note: The Riesling Art Series (\$22), all citrus and floral notes, also develops well in the bottle. The Chardonnay Prelude Vineyards (\$29), made from estate-grown grapes that don't go into the Art Series, often reaches the 90-point zone and is ready earlier.

MOUNT HORROCKS

Riesling Cordon Cut

Mount Horrocks Wines, Clare Valley, South Australia

Web site www.mounthorrocks.com

Average case production 1,350

Winery production 4,500 cases

Current vintage 2005; 94 points, \$30/350ml, 440 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (94), 2003 (92), 2002 (94)

Every autumn, Stephanie Toole goes through her 25 acres of vineyards in Clare Valley carefully slicing part way through the fruiting Riesling canes. Then she leaves the grape bunches to raisin naturally on the vine. Several weeks later, if it hasn't rained excessively, Toole harvests the grapes to produce the Cordon Cut, a sweet wine of astonishing richness and vivid flavor.

A vein of refined acidity runs through the sweetness to balance the wine, making it feel vibrant and framing the heady lime-accented green plum, pineapple and apricot flavors. In some vintages, a mineral component is present. But the wine is unaffected by botrytis, so it never gets too honeyed.

Toole bought Mount Horrocks in 1993, and in 1998 opened a tasting room and restaurant around the corner from Grosset, her husband's winery, where she makes her wines.

Other wines of note: The dry Riesling Watervale (\$20) has classic Clare Valley quince and mineral character, made in a steely style.

PENFOLDS

Shiraz Grange

Penfolds Vineyards, Adelaide, South Australia

Web site www.penfolds.com

Average case production 8,000

Winery production 2.8 million cases

Current vintage 2002; 95 points, \$250, 1,095 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2001 (93), 1999 (94), 1998 (99)

Grange proved to the world that Australia could make great wine. In the 1950s, then-winemaker Max Schubert used old-vine Shiraz, to that point employed almost exclusively for Australian Port, to produce a dry table wine. Those old vintages are not only still drinkable, they can be ethereal.

That's what makes Grange special. Despite the wine's reputation as a blockbuster, current winemaker Peter Gago wants it to caress the palate with velvety texture and show less alcohol than more recent competitors in the great red table wine race. It has unmistakable power, but ultimately, it's the wine's balance and harmony among complex elements that wins you over.

The core component comes from vines planted in the mid-19th century on the sandy soils of Kalimna Vineyard, on the northwest side of Barossa. The rest is sourced from Barossa, Coonawarra, Clare and McLaren Vale vines at least 60 years old, with a dollop of Cabernet Sauvignon added in most vintages to up the elegance. Schubert used American oak barrels to age Grange for two years, a tradition that continues to this day, and the wine matures in bottle for another three years before release.

Other wines of note: The range of ageable Shiraz styles under the Penfolds umbrella is impressive, including the modern, lush RWT (\$82), the Rhôneish St. Henri (\$42), and the claretlike single-vineyard Magill Estate (\$53). Penfolds is also famous for its Cabernet Sauvignon Bin 707 (\$80). Among a welter of recent special bottlings, Cabernet Sauvignon Block 42 (\$225) and Shiraz-Cabernet Bin 60A (\$225) are standouts. The flagship white wine, Chardonnay Yattarna (\$65), has become leaner and more ageable recently.

PETALUMA

Chardonnay Piccadilly Tiers

Petaluma Wines, Piccadilly, Adelaide Hills, South Australia

Web site www.petaluma.com.au

Average case production 200

Winery production 21,000 cases

Current vintage 2002; 95 points, \$64, 200 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2001 (93), 1999 (93)

Brian and Ann Croser planted their Chardonnay vineyard in Piccadilly, a particularly cool corner of Adelaide Hills, in the late 1970s. They built their home on the edge of the vineyard, which slopes precipitously down to the winery. Tiers is the top section; the Crosers made a separate bottling from it starting in 1998, and kept title to the vineyard when they sold the brand and winery to Lion Nathan in 2001.

The basic Piccadilly Chardonnay consistently rates around 90 points, but Tiers simply has more class, balancing its effusive stone fruit, white pepper and mineral flavors with a palpable sense of reserve. It is elegant, and it often rates among Australia's best white wines. Petaluma Tiers is aged three years in bottle before release. It's worth the wait.

Since 2005, the Crosers have kept half the grapes for their own Tapanappa label. From a section they had replanted recently to closer spacing, the wine is released after only 18 months because the vines are young.

Other wines of note: The Riesling Clare Valley Hanlin Hill (\$20) has the distinctive floral and mineral tang of the region and can be aged for a decade or more. The Shiraz Adelaide Hills (\$35), made in a peppery cool-climate style, is better than the Cabernet-based red Coonawarra (\$38), which is often too herbal.

ROCKFORD

Shiraz Basket Press

Rockford Wines, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site NA

Average case production 2,000

Winery production 20,000 cases

Current vintage 2002; 91 points, \$70, 2,000 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2000 (92)

Rockford owner Robert O'Callaghan steadfastly holds to a way of making wine that is out of step with today's world. He uses older equipment discarded by other wineries as they modernized, including a formidable array of basket presses. And his Shiraz Basket Press, representative of a winemaking style that has fallen out of favor, doesn't try to extract too much. O'Callaghan and winemaker Chris Ringland aim to present the wine as a pleasing canvas for food.

The grapes come from local growers, many of whom have done business with O'Callaghan since he built the place around a 1850s-era cottage in 1984. And before, when he worked for Seppelt.

The better vintages taste of cherries and roasted meat, with hints of coffee and tar. Others can slide into leathery and gamy characteristics—not for all tastes, but they always have a harmonious feel.

Other wines of note: The Riesling Eden Valley Hand Picked (\$30) offers crisp green apple character and welcome mineral notes in a style built to age 10 years or more.

ROSEMOUNT

Syrah Balmoral

Rosemount Estate, McLaren Vale, South Australia

Web site www.rosemountestate.com

Average case production 3,700

Winery production 3 million cases

Current vintage 2002; 92 points, \$50, 1,800 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2000 (93), 1999 (93), 1998 (92)

Rosemount made its first Balmoral in 1992, naming the wine after the homestead of the founding

Oatley family. Then-winemaker Philip Shaw, who used only McLaren Vale Shiraz from vines at least 50 years old, aimed for a fresh, bright style to make an expressive wine that wasn't overblown; it's called Syrah, not Shiraz, to reflect the stylistic choice.

That was when Rosemount was a privately held company based in Hunter Valley. Now it's part of Foster's Group, but Rosemount winemaker Charles Whish still uses grapes from the vineyards that made the 1992, plus a few others that have earned a place the blend over the years. In a winery that's a forest of stainless steel, Whish ferments this wine in concrete tanks and uses basket presses to finish it, aging the wine 30 months in a mix of new and used oak barrels.

The wines continue to show a distinctive blueberry character at the core, mineral nuances at the edges, and a sense of completeness and harmony that only old vines can bring.

Other wines of note: The GSM (\$22), a blend of Grenache, Shiraz and Mourvèdre, sometimes competes favorably with the Balmoral for Rosemount's best of vintage. At the value end, the Diamond Label series (\$10) offers bright, clear flavors at moderate prices.

SHAW & SMITH

Chardonnay M3 Vineyard

Shaw & Smith Wines, Adelaide Hills, South Australia

Web site www.shawandsmith.com

Average case production 3,000

Winery production 26,000 cases

Current vintage 2005; 91 points, \$29, 3,000 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (93), 2002 (91)

Michael Hill Smith comes from the family that owns Yalumba in the Barossa, but he set off on his own early. In 1988 he became the first Australian to pass the Master of Wine exam, and in 1991 opened the popular Universal Wine Bar in Adelaide. He joined with his cousin Martin Shaw in 1989 to make wine in Adelaide Hills, specifically, he says, to "bust the stereotype" of Aussie wines as sunny, cheerful and soulless.

The M3 Vineyard, planted in 1994 and named for Martin, Michael and Michael's brother Matthew, adjoins the utilitarian, steel-shed winery in Adelaide Hills. On sandy loam and clay with shale beneath, the Chardonnay vines produce a wine with startling fruit purity and hints of minerality. It's always silky in texture, and often tastes better after five years in bottle.

Other wines of note: The Sauvignon Blanc (\$19) is perhaps the best in Australia, made in a zingy, citrusy style that would give New Zealand versions a run for their money. An Adelaide Hills Shiraz (\$31), redolent of black pepper, also has some zip.

TAPANAPPA

Cabernet-Shiraz Whalebone Vineyard

Tapanappa Wines, Wrattontully, South Australia

Web site www.tapanappawines.com.au

Average case production 700

Winery production 1,000 cases

Current vintage 2004; 93 points, \$65, 700 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2003 (93)

Close on the heels of Lion Nathan's takeover of Petaluma in 2001, founder Brian Croser hooked up with Bollinger S.A., his former partner at Petaluma, to buy the historic Koppamurra vineyard in what is now called Wrattontully. It sits on classic Terra Rossa soil over limestone, and has a more moderate climate than Barossa or McLaren Vale. Croser knows the vineyard well; as a young winemaker in 1980, he helped Geoff Weaver make the first wine from those vines. And he planted his own Cabernet vineyard not far away, from which he made the Coonawarra red at Petaluma.

Bordeaux's Jean-Michel Cazes, who owns Château Lynch-Bages, joined the partnership before it produced its first wine in 2003. The blend of 70 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 20 percent Shiraz and

10 percent Cabernet Franc has elegance and warmth, with a loamy, faintly eucalyptus accent to the dark fruit flavors, remaining refined through a long finish.

Other wines of note: The Chardonnay (\$65), made from Croser's Tiers Vineyard in Piccadilly, Adelaide Hills, debuted with the 2005 vintage as a subtle, stunning, beautifully structured wine. Coming next is Pinot Noir from a new vineyard on the Fleurieu Peninsula.

TORBRECK

Shiraz RunRig

Torbreck Vintners, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site www.torbreck.com

Average case production 1,000

Winery production 50,000 cases

Current vintage 2004; 94 points, \$220, 900 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2003 (94), 2002 (93), 2001 (98), 1999 (95)

Dave Powell was working at Barossa's Rockford Winery when he helped a few area growers nurture some neglected, decades-old Shiraz and Grenache vines back to health. In 1995, under a shared crop arrangement, he crushed a few tons of these grapes in a nondescript shed on his property. His Torbreck label, named after a forest in Scotland, where he worked as a lumberjack, debuted in 1997 with the release of a small 1995 vintage.

RunRig uses some of the oldest Shiraz vines in Barossa, some dating to the 1860s, with a dollop of Viognier (usually 3 to 4 percent) added just before bottling for an extra layer of complexity and polish. Basket-pressed, the wine ages in barrel for two-and-a-half years, only 60 percent in new oak. The effect on the palate is crisp and fresh, like biting into a juicy plum, but the flavors mingle effortlessly, pile on generously, and soar on a long finish.

Other wines of note: Descendent (\$105), a single-vineyard wine from vines planted in 1994 from cuttings from vineyards that had been going into RunRig, usually comes off as lighter and brighter than its granddad. The Factor (\$105), 100 percent old-vine Barossa Shiraz, shows a bit more licorice and tar in the mix than RunRig. The Struie (\$50) blends old-vine Shiraz from Eden and Barossa valleys and often shows more zing of acidity. At the value end, the Woodcutter's Shiraz (\$20) emphasizes ripe fruit and polished texture.

TWO HANDS

Shiraz Ares

Two Hands Wines, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site www.twohands.wines.com

Average case production 1,000

Winery production 30,000 cases

Current vintage 2005; 98 points, \$150, 850 cases made

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (97), 2003 (95), 2002 (95), 2001 (95)

Two Hands started up in 1999 but already ranks among the best, most reliable labels in Australia, producing delicious wines across its portfolio. The Grenache is good and there's a nice Riesling, a Moscato, even a Tempranillo. But the best bottlings focus on Shiraz.

For Ares, their flagship bottling, Michael Twelftree and Richard Mintz (the "two hands"), along with winemaker Matt Wenk, taste through all their Barossa Shiraz barrels six months after the vintage and choose those with the headiest, densest, most profound wines. The final blend ages in new French oak barrels. Ares is notable for its polished texture and vibrant flavors and is tremendously aromatic, while seeming to balance it all on a razor's edge. It's a big wine with finesse.

Other wines of note: Standouts in the Garden Series (\$60)—regionally distinct Shiraz bottlings from Barossa, McLaren Vale, Clare, Langhorne Creek, Padthaway and Heathcote—usually include Bella's (Barossa) and Lily's (McLaren). Several other wines can challenge these, including Gnarly Dudes (\$30), another Barossa Shiraz; Bad Impersonator (\$30), a single-vineyard Barossa Shiraz that seems more Rhône-like; Angel's Share (\$30), a McLaren Vale Shiraz, and Brave Faces (\$36),

a Barossa Shiraz-Grenache blend.

YALUMBA

Grenache Hand Picked Tricentenary Vines

Yalumba, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Web site www.yalumba.com

Average case production 1,500

Winery production 930,000 cases

Current vintage 2005; 90 points, \$30, 100 cases imported

Best recent vintages (pts.) 2004 (92), 2003 (90), 1999 (90)

Yalumba believed in Barossa Grenache when few others did. Even as area wineries and growers were pulling out their Grenache, Yalumba propagated the variety and added to its own vineyards, most of which were planted in the early 20th century as bush vines. Yalumba maintains them in that form, without trellising.

Tricentenary Vines comes from a single site, a stand of vines adjacent to Yalumba's plant nursery. The vines date from 1889, making them some of the oldest Grenache vines in Australia. Their grapes had been going into the Bush Vine Grenache, but the vineyard got its own bottling in 1999 as it approached the milestone of bearing fruit in three separate centuries.

Though originally intended for fortified wine, these vines today make a supple, spicy table wine of distinctive rhubarb and raspberry flavors, sometimes hinting at guava or pomegranate. The finish is long and the wine shows signs of aging well. The first vintages still taste fresh and are developing more spice as they mature.

Other wines of note: Bush Vine Grenache (\$16) is like a sibling to the Tricentenary bottling, often as appealing if not as ageable. Yalumba also makes several Viogniers, including The Virgilius (\$40), fragrant with tropical fruit character but not heavy. Among Yalumba's high-end wines, the Signature (\$45), a blend of Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon, usually comes off the best. At the value end, the Y series offers better than average character at about \$11.

OTHER NOTABLE WINERIES AND BOTTLINGS

To compile our roster of Australia's benchmarks, we gave priority to wines with track records of excellence in *Wine Spectator* ratings. Only one wine from each winery made the list, and newer wineries were included only if tastings of unreleased wines indicated that they were upholding or improving their standards. The list also attempts to reflect the breadth of quality winemaking across Australia.

Some Australian wines of undeniable excellence are not currently exported to the United States—Wendouree Shiraz (and other red blends), Pierro Chardonnay, Best's Great Western Shiraz and Lake's Folly Cabernet Sauvignon among them—or are exported in such limited quantities, as with Pewsey Vale Riesling, to make them too difficult to obtain.

Other wines highly regarded in Australia have not performed as well in my recent tastings. These include Giaconda Chardonnay, McWilliam's Mount Pleasant Sémillon, Bass Phillip Pinot Noir, Brokenwood Shiraz Graveyard Vineyard, Hardys Shiraz Eileen Hardy, Mount Langi Ghiran Shiraz, Noon Shiraz Reserve, Tahbilk Shiraz 1860 Vines, Parker Coonawarra Estate Terra Rossa First Growth, Howard Park Cabernet Sauvignon, Vasse Felix Heytesbury Cabernet Sauvignon, Wynns Coonawarra Estate Cabernet Sauvignon John Riddoch, Yarra Yering Dry Red No. 1 and Mount Mary Quintet Cabernet Sauvignon.

Some well-established wines did not surpass similar wines included on the list, such as Mesh Riesling, d'Arenberg Shiraz The Dead Arm, Dalwhinnie Shiraz, Fox Gordon Shiraz, Greg Norman Estates Shiraz Reserve and Marquis Philips S2, Peter Lehmann Shiraz Stonewell, St. Hallett Shiraz Old Block and Yangarra Estate Cadenzia, a Grenache blend.

Other established wines scored well in some vintages, but lack consistent ratings or number of vintages reviewed. Among them are Cullen Diana Madeline, Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon,

Balnaves The Talley, Majella The Malleea, De Bortoli Noble One, Chris Ringland Shiraz and Greenock Creek Shiraz.

Several new wines look poised to make a future list, including Green Point Shiraz Reserve, Hobbs Shiraz, John Duval Entity, Mollydooker Shiraz Velvet Glove, Schild Shiraz Reserve, Thorn-Clarke Shiraz William Randell, Sons of Eden Shiraz Romulus and Shiraz Remus, Whistling Eagle Shiraz Eagles Blood and Kooyong Pinot Noir.

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