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Cabernet On the Rise

Shiraz still dominates Australian exports, but the country's No. 2 red is coming on strong

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After spending years in the shadow of Shiraz, Australian Cabernet Sauvignon has finally stepped into the spotlight. In my report four years ago ("Renewed Allure," July 31, 2010), only a tiny number of varietal Cabernets and Cabernet-based blends earned outstanding ratings (90 points or higher on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale). But the figure has been climbing ever since. This year, 41 versions reached the 90-plus camp, striking a winning balance between Australia's signature ripe fruit and the savory notes found in the best Cabernets from across the world.

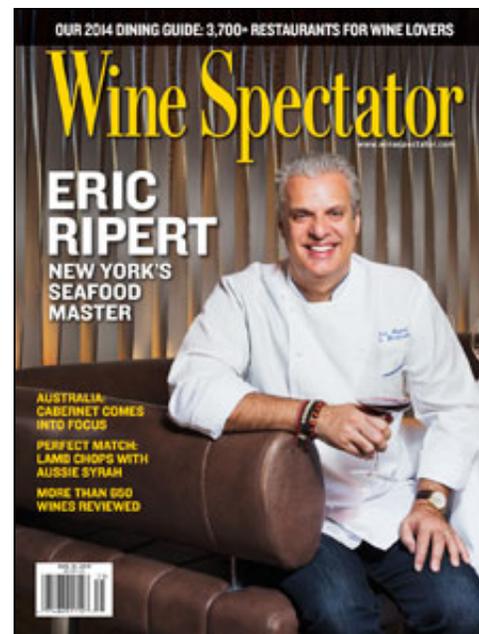
This flavor balance is now common in most good Australian Cabernets. For years, Aussie vintners tended to overemphasize the savory green side of the wine, even welcoming vegetal character in order to differentiate Cabernet Sauvignon from Shiraz. That profile never gained much traction among consumers outside Australia, but now that vintners are coaxing out more fruit in the wines, the audience for the category is growing.

Although Shiraz and Shiraz blends still account for nearly half of the 633 Australian wines I've reviewed since my last report ("Australia on the Move," Aug. 31, 2013), on a percentage basis the overall quality of Australian Cabernet has caught up with that of Shiraz. Of the nearly 100 Cabs and Cab blends in this report, 42 percent got over the 90-plus bar, versus 40 percent of the nearly 300 Shiraz-based wines under review. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

And this success comes without the Penfolds Bin 707; Australia's most celebrated Cabernet, which topped last year's report with a 97-point rating for the 2010 vintage, was not bottled from 2011. Although smart winemakers could get good wines from that cold and wet year, few vineyards produced great Cabernet grapes. With the 707 on the disabled list, the focus moves to the rest of the winery's Cabernet profile, including several new bottlings meant to accommodate demand at different price levels.

Much of what might have gone into the 707 in 2011 was diverted into the Penfolds Cabernet Sauvignon South Australia Bin 407 2011, whose 91-point score (\$69) represents my highest rating ever for this midlevel wine. Finely focused, with a blanket of fine tannins settling over the nicely modulated flavors, the wine brims with juicy currant fruit at the core, with hints of red pepper and sweet spices. Cabernet plays the lead role in the Penfolds Cabernet-Shiraz South Australia Bin 389 2011 (90 points, \$69), which wraps crunchy tannins around a sleek core of currant and red plum flavors. The Penfolds lineup also features a new Cabernet called Bin 9; its debut 2012 (89, \$24), a significantly better vintage than 2011, offers glints of savory flavors around a lithe core of black fruit and cocoa.

"However much Cabernet we make, it's not enough in any market now," says Peter Gago, Penfolds' chief winemaker. "A-grade Cabernet is hard to come by. For Shiraz we're well-covered, but we're finding new areas to develop for Cabernet." Penfolds isn't the only label finding worthy sources in areas such as Wrattontully and Adelaide Plains in South Australia, and parts of central Victoria and Western Australia.



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Several regions that have traditionally done well with the variety yielded most of the top-rated Cabernets in this report. Cabernet is the calling card for Coonawarra, an area defined by a long, cigar-shaped outcropping of rusty red soils set over underlying limestone. The wines capture a precise definition of classic Cabernet fruit flavors and crisp texture. The Wynns Coonawarra Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Coonawarra John Riddoch Limited Release 2010 (93, \$95) validates a return to prominence by this pioneering winery, offering layers of bay leaf and dried herbs that weave through a focused core of juicy currant fruit. Other notable Coonawarra Cabs in this report include the Penley Cabernet Sauvignon Coonawarra Reserve 2010 (92, \$50) and Wolf Blass Cabernet Sauvignon Coonawarra Gold Label 2012 (91, \$25).

Typical of the best wines from McLaren Vale, a seaside region of gently rolling hills south of Adelaide, the Two Hands Cabernet Sauvignon McLaren Vale Sexy Beast 2012 (93, \$30) has generous raspberry and black cherry fruit at its core, revealing just enough herbal nuances to gain depth and presence. Another McLaren Vale winner is the Cabernet Sauvignon McLaren Vale Gigglepote 2012 (90, \$50) from Mollydooker.

Australians have long lauded Cabernets from Margaret River, in Western Australia, although the wines' tendency toward green pepper flavors has not won many fans in the United States. A trend toward slightly riper grapes has paid dividends, with the green flavors evolving into sage notes that add pleasant angles to Ringbolt's Cabernet Sauvignon Margaret River 2012 (90, \$18). At the high end, the Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon Margaret River Moss Wood Vineyard 2010 (93, \$100) plays out layers of plum and currant fruit on a deftly balanced frame, delivering appealing purity, subtlety and depth.

Although Barossa, in South Australia, has its share of expressive Cabernets, the better ones are usually blended with the region's acclaimed Shiraz. Glaetzer's Shiraz-Cabernet blend Anaperenna Barossa Valley 2012 (92, \$80) wraps spicy plum, blackberry and rhubarb flavors into a rich, concentrated package. The Yalumba Cabernet Sauvignon-Shiraz Barossa The Signature 2010 (91, \$59) picks up a tantalizing pomegranate note on the persistent finish. And, at a surprisingly modest price point, the supple, expressive Peter Lehmann Clancy's Barossa 2011 (90, \$15), a blend of Cabernet, Shiraz and Merlot, delivers pure blueberry and plum fruit, with impressive presence and length.

The only category to post a higher success rate than Cabernet Sauvignon in this report is Grenache. Even without any wines released in the past year from perennial top Grenache-maker Clarendon Hills, 22 varietal bottlings and blends rated outstanding among the 43 reviewed. These include the top-rated Yalumba Barossa Single Site Tri-Centenary Vineyard Vine Vale 2008 (92, \$65), which is bright and appealing for its juicy red berry and fresh tomato flavors, and Yalumba Grenache Barossa Old Bush Vine 2012 (90, \$19), showing the lighter side of the grape with a mix of red and black fruit that plays against the open texture.

Although Grenache can show higher alcohol levels than Shiraz, its polish and deftness often are more reminiscent of Pinot Noir. In recent vintages, too, Australia has seen a noticeable rise in slim, sleek Grenache bottlings, primarily coming from cooler climates. Their vivid flavors and structures defy the cliché of Australian wines as uniformly big and broad-shouldered.

Ochota Barrels' Grenache McLaren Vale The Fugazi Vineyard Onka Blewitt Ridge 2013 (90, \$65) is extremely light, with floral, peppery strawberry and cherry flavors on a tangy, mildly grippy frame, while the winery's fresh and vibrant Grenache-Syrah McLaren Vale The Green Room 2013 (91, \$40) focuses on red berry and cinnamon notes.

"I like that sapid, nervous tension that comes from grapes picked a few days earlier than usual," says Taras Ochota, whose résumé includes stints making wine in Italy and at Two Hands in Barossa. "To me, glycerol and alcohol from riper fruit comes through as sweetness. It can inhibit your appetite. I want my wines to make your mouth water."

Regional and climatic diversity accounts for other wines in this emerging lighter style. The De Bortoli Pinot Noir Yarra Valley Estate Grown Dixons Creek Vineyard 2012 (90, \$32) is one example of how this variety is showing signs of life in Australia. Sleek and refreshing, it has a pleasant lilt to the dark berry and floral flavors. Several small-volume Pinot Noirs from Tasmania are starting to enter the marketplace as well.

The turn away from muscular wines has also affected Chardonnay. A look at the four top-rated bottlings reveals the range of styles being produced today.

Traditionally richer bottlings still do well, including stalwarts such as the Giaconda Chardonnay Victoria Estate Vineyard, whose 2011 (93, \$140) packs rich, orange peel-accented pineapple and floral flavors into a seductive package on an almost

delicate frame. Margaret River, long home to opulent and polished Chardonnays, produced the Vasse Felix Chardonnay Margaret River Heytesbury 2012 (93, \$60), which gathers spicy, leesy pear and tobacco flavors into a harmonious chord.

Among those going for more tang, Penfolds' Chardonnay Tasmania Yattarna Bin 144 2011 (93, \$130) layers grapefruit, pineapple and wax notes on a sleek and expressive frame. Newcomer BK Chardonnay Piccadilly Valley Swaby Single Vineyard 2012 (93, \$75) weaves mineral accents into pear compote and savory spice flavors, showcasing presence and finesse.

Aussie Riesling has always been a lean, crisp sip and is almost always made in a dry style, with alcohol levels around 12 percent. The wines tend toward tart citrus flavors on steely frames when young, and often develop depth and softer textures with five to 10 years in the bottle, making them excellent candidates for cellaring. Pewsey Vale's Riesling Eden Valley The Contours Museum Reserve 10 Year Cellar Aged 2003 (93, \$46) offers lemon curd and chamomile flavors, with a crisp texture. For something young to cellar, try Wakefield Riesling Clare Valley St. Andrews Single Vineyard Release 2013 (92, \$40), which shows green pear, apple and white pepper flavors and should need only a few years for the edges to soften. Consider also the bright, delicate Fowles Riesling Strathbogie Ranges Stone Dwellers 2013 (91, \$20), with lemon curd and white pepper overtones to its green apple flavors.

All the diversity and depth being added to Australia's wine portfolio has yet to unseat Shiraz from the top tier of the country's table wines. Only a few extraordinary fortified wines—a great but underappreciated category—break up the solid run of Shirazes claiming the top slots.

At the apex, the inky dark and seductively fragrant Mollydooker Shiraz McLaren Vale Velvet Glove 2012 (98, \$185) captures glints of red earth, cinnamon and licorice in its opulent fruit, yet has remarkable depth and finesse for a wine of such power. Penfolds' famed Shiraz South Australia Grange is just a tad overripe in 2009 (94, \$850) and lacks the complete harmony of the best vintages. Still an impressive wine, it was outperformed by a stablemate from a more harmonious vintage, the Shiraz South Australia St. Henri 2010 (95, \$99). This energetic bottling has the goods to age gracefully for decades, featuring fleshy mouthfuls of blueberry, fresh currant and plum, shaded with spice and loamy earth notes.

Another consistent winner, the Two Hands Shiraz Barossa Valley Bella's Garden is seamless, focused, powerful and elegant in 2012 (95, \$69), delivering fruit complexity, savory nuances and a finish that won't quit.

Moving down the ladder yields some terrific examples of Shiraz at more moderate prices and with good availability. For something traditionally bold, try the Dead Letter Office Shiraz Padthaway-McLaren Vale 2009 (90, \$27), from the makers of Henry's Drive. Fans of peppery styles should look for Pyren Shiraz Pyrenees Broken Quartz 2012 (91, \$22), a light-footed wine with plum and currant fruit at the core. Fowles' Shiraz Victoria Are You Game? 2012 (91, \$17) balances spiciness with appealing cherry and blueberry fruit. And the Jim Barry Shiraz Clare Valley The Lodge Hill 2012 (90, \$19) is a sleek style at a go-for-it price, offering dark berry, tea leaf and spice flavors on a polished frame.

Though Australia's major growing regions usually achieve consistency year-to-year, recent vintages have shown more substantial variation. In the mostly warm Barossa and McLaren Vale areas, for example, heat waves in 2008 and 2009 forced winemakers to choose between picking grapes early or making extra-rich wines that could tip over into heaviness. In the cold, wet 2011 growing season, some vineyards were left unpicked as growers battled rot and grapes struggled to ripen, even for white varieties that are typically less affected by vintage.

Both 2010 and 2012 were nearly ideal, however, with moderate temperatures producing beautifully sleek wines. Now headed into the pipeline, 2013 also looks promising, with the early-release wines tasting fresh and deftly balanced. Completed in April, the 2014 vintage was troublesome throughout, although a long stretch of pleasant weather at harvest countered the short yields.

There were more wines to review in the past year than in 2013, which gained over 2012. This trend reflects the reappearance of some wineries that had stopped exporting to the United States, and the emergence of some new wineries as well. This growth in the industry makes the present an especially good time to take a look at what Australia has to offer, especially when it comes to Cabernet.

Editor at large Harvey Steiman is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Australia.

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