

WINES TO WATCH



TEXT CAMPBELL MATTINSON

Style and Substance

Whether tasting Yarra Valley varieties, an all-out South Australian shiraz or getting in early on a Hunter semillon, an open attitude to style variations reaps rewards.



GEMTREE VINEYARDS BLOODSTONE TEMPRANILLO

Tempranillo is the kind of variety that gets grape growers twitching. Its potential is exciting – the grapes ripen early in the season and hold their acidity, as the flavours develop, better than most reds. It has been known to perform rather well when the weather heats up, most notably in Rioja, Spain. All of which are pluses in the Australian context. Tempranillo vines also tend to grow a lot of grapes each season, which can be a positive thing – though Gemtree Vineyards' 2005 Bloodstone Tempranillo (A\$25/NZ\$27) did not crop high, mostly because the McLaren Vale soil it's grown in tends to naturally keep its yields in check. Gemtree's tempranillo vines have only been growing since 1999, but with both the 2004 and 2005 releases the results are hugely promising.

The 2005 is a must-try wine. It's dry, chewy, taut and refreshing yet has a kick of creamy, inky, brandied flavour; aromas of violets and hazelnuts clear as you swirl it around your glass. I'll admit that I didn't think I was going to like it, but in fact I loved it – so much so that I went out and bought some. It's sealed under screwcap and, while drinking a treat now, will definitely cellar for at least five to seven years.

DE BORTOLI YARRA VALLEY

De Bortoli's Yarra Valley arm is arguably the best winery in the country at the moment. Its rise over the past three or four years has been breathtaking, most notably with pinot noir across various prices but with sauvignon blanc and shiraz equally so, and a range of other varieties and blends fast moving up behind. To emphasize the point, the 2005 De Bortoli Estate Grown Pinot Noir (A\$30/NZ\$39.95) is a pinnacle of affordable pinot: structured, pure and delicate yet intense, and

every ounce of it built to age. It drinks like a \$50 pinot, especially if you give it an hour or two in the decanter. If the variety appeals to you at all, you'd be mad not to chase it up.

What have taken a significant leap forward in De Bortoli's Yarra Valley range are chardonnay and shiraz viognier, though the wines were excellent to start with. De Bortoli's Yarra Valley chardonnay has been one of Australia's most positively reviewed wines over the past decade, and the 2005 Estate Grown (A\$28) release is the best ever under this label.

It comes from vines with an average age of 15 years, was fermented wild and was treated with extreme care in the winery (no fining, no pumps, all gravity movement from one stage of the winemaking process to another) and, most radically of all for a super-premium wine, only 8 per cent of it saw any new French oak at all – the remaining wine matured in used French oak on the second, third and fourth fills. It is certainly wooded, but in the most careful way possible. It tastes of lemon and chalk and, believe it or not, needs another year or three in a cool place to really show its best.

There was a time, not too long ago, when even the best Australian chardonnay was a dodgy cellaring proposition. Not any more. In the medium-term, given the right conditions, this wine should perform beautifully. It's just about as close to good Chablis as Australian chardonnay gets.

The 2005 De Bortoli Estate Grown Shiraz Viognier (A\$30/NZ\$39.95) is a blinder of a wine and should also cellar tremendously. Again, you can't help but admire the attention to detail: the grapes were hand-picked, hand-sorted, naturally fermented and, during that fermentation, allowed to warm to 35C – no refrigeration control being employed. De Bortoli's chief winemaker, Steve Webber, knows how hard it can be for



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winemakers to keep their hands off wine and simply let it “make” itself – within an elaborately thought-out framework – but that’s exactly what his team has learned to do.

Webber’s shiraz viognier is, as you’d hope, different to other interpretations of the style. It is also quite beautiful – meaty, cherried, stinky and very finely structured. But what really sets it apart is a flare of delicious and exotic fragrance and a steely, mineral, focused finish. Outstanding stuff.

MCWILLIAM’S MOUNT PLEASANT LOVEDALE SEMILLON

Now you get a choice – and what a lovely one. Over the past few years, Mount Pleasant has started releasing a portion of its illustrious Lovedale Semillon as a young wine (in the past it’s been released as a semi-mature wine, six years from vintage). This means that you can now buy the excellent 2001 Lovedale via retail outlets but can also purchase the 2006 Lovedale (A\$38.40) from the cellar door, either to cellar yourself or to drink young.

The 2006 is a wine that proves why this single-vineyard wine of character is at the

top of the Australian semillon tree. It has an instant appetising appeal in its dry, chalky, lemony flavour, and its future richness is only evident in the whisper of milk powder-like flavour that comes through as the wine opens up. Personally, I will be buying some to drink young – from my best glassware – as it’s just too enchanting to miss.

MOLLYDOOKER THE BOXER

Australian slang for a left-handed person, in wine terms Mollydooker could well be another word for controversy. This new wine brand of the same name comes from McLaren Vale winemaking duo Sarah and Sparky Marquis. This team has already had outstanding international success through prior stints at Fox Creek, Parson’s Flat, Henry’s Drive, Shirvington and Marquis Philips. All these brands have been “Parkerised” in that they have received very high scores from US wine critic Robert Parker Jr, and Sarah and Sparky have subsequently gained cult status as winemakers with a Midas touch, most of their success having been in America. And now Mollydooker wines have been Parkerised too.

Sarah and Sparky attract controversy because they are so ridiculously successful but also because they do things their own way. They use a radically different watering regimen on their vines, tend to let their grapes hang out on the vine far longer than other growers, make high-alcohol wines with soup-like concentration and often do it all using fairly young vines rather than the old ones more commonly used for top-grade, top-priced wine. Some people call their methods mad, others call them genius, and there’s a lot of evidence to suggest that they’re both. The end result is a set of massively flavoured wines that polarise opinion and leave no-one in any doubt over what style they are trying to achieve. Just make it loud, okay?

If you want to test the Mollydooker magic, their wines are now for sale in Australia. The best of the bunch to seek out is the 2005 The Boxer Shiraz (A\$23). It’s blatantly hedonistic and warm, with flavours of tar, plum jam, cloves and toast turned to high. If you enjoy the mega style of wine, this one should blow your socks off.

Prices are approximate; where unlisted, wines are not available in that country. To source wines, see page 155.