

Attention Restaurateurs:  
2021 Restaurant Award  
applications have reopened  
for any 2020 winners that  
missed the deadline for  
COVID-related reasons.

## TASTING REPORTS

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# Ready for Their Close-Up

Australian producers are poised for a breakthrough moment in the U.S.



Hickinbotham's estate vineyards in McLaren Vale yielded five outstanding reds from the 2018 vintage.  
(Courtesy of Jackson Family Wines)



**By MaryAnn Worobiec**

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Australian wine has it all. While benchmark estates maintain their trademark style and high quality from vintage to vintage, a spirit of innovation across this vast continent's many winegrowing areas is inspiring greater freshness and more complex aromatics. The diversity on offer from region to region yields plenty of distinctive expressions, some of them from family-owned, multigenerational wineries rooted in traditional practices and a deep sense of place.

The only thing missing is a wide-enough audience in the United States to appreciate this bounty. What's needed is the critical mass to capture the hearts of American wine lovers. It's not an easy task, but Australian vintners have made it their priority.

To be clear, the quality of the wines is already there. Of the more than 425 Aussie wines I have reviewed in blind tastings since my previous report ("[Unshakable Resolve](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/unshakable-resolve) [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/unshakable-resolve>]," Aug. 31, 2020), 46% received outstanding ratings of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, with 16 of them at the classic level of 95-plus.

At first glance, these high-scoring wines read like a who's who of the country's elite brands, which have been dominating the leaderboard for years. Henschke, Penfolds, Powell & Son, Jim Barry, Leeuwin, John Duval and Torbreck all have well-earned reputations for making some of the best wines from Down Under. Yet within the top ranks this year, there are impressive bottlings from a wider range of producers than might be expected.

Clonakilla, a brand with a cultlike following in Australia, is available in the U.S. for the first time in years, producing distinctive Shiraz from Canberra in New South Wales. Giant Steps makes precise, cool-climate Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs from its vineyards in Yarra Valley, while offerings from Tolpuddle, Dalrymple and Devil's Corner give us a peek at the striking wines coming from the emerging region of Tasmania. Examples of outstanding Semillon, Muscat, Viognier, Riesling and even Assyrtiko

showcase the diversity of Aussie wine, broadening the discussion beyond the Cabernet, Shiraz and Grenache the country is best known for.

Yet summarizing Australian wine is a challenge. The country has roughly the same landmass as that of the U.S., with 60 winegrowing regions and more than a dozen grape varieties that thrive in its vineyards. Wine lovers would never equate Finger Lakes Rieslings with Napa Valley Cabernets or Willamette Valley Pinot Noirs, but that's essentially what it's like to talk about Hunter Valley Sémillons, Yarra Valley Pinot Noirs and Margaret River Cabernets in the same conversation.

One hurdle has been the success of a handful of mass-produced wines that have come to define Australia for those who aren't paying attention. Beyond these fruity Shirazes and straightforward Chardonnays, there's so much more to discover, from bold, concentrated reds to vibrant, elegant whites.



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How do Australian producers get a foothold in the U.S. market? Most winemakers I speak to are hopeful, despite shrinking space on wine lists and retail shelves, that they can create an image around their super-premium wines, since their loyal customers have remained steadfast. But global developments are now forcing them to think even more seriously about their stateside expansion.

Many wineries are still reeling from the now-broken trade relationship with China. In November 2020, anti-dumping duties of 116%–218% were imposed on Australian wines, scheduled to stay in place for five years.

China had accused Australia of flooding the market with wines priced below fair market value. Deteriorating political relations between the two countries got worse when Australia called for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. High tariffs were also placed on barley, beef, lobsters and coal.

As a result, exports of Australian wine to China have essentially dried up. China was an important market for Australia, accounting for about 40% of the country's total wine exports, and the punitive tariffs are forcing some producers to change their sales strategies.

Most vintners believe the full effects of these trade restrictions won't be felt for a couple of years, as increased domestic sales, as well as a string of recent small harvests, will keep the impact at bay. But there's no question that wineries are looking to the U.S. as they plan for the future.

In recent years, sales of Australian wine have mostly been flat in the U.S., but that doesn't mean brands aren't trying to enter, or re-enter, the market. "No one is totally reliant on China," says Yarra Valley winemaker Ben Haines. "For years, we've seen the headlines in the industry that you have to diversify, stop putting all your eggs in the China basket. We're prepared." He adds that recent small vintages like 2019 and 2020 can help mitigate damaging effects, at least for the time being.

These low-yielding vintages make producers excited about 2021, where yields appear to be up across the board. Echoing other vintners, Barossa winemaker Stephen Henschke reports that his estate harvested more grapes in 2021 than 2019 and 2020 combined.

There tends to be less discussion about vintages in Australia than in other parts of the world, so I asked a number of vintners if they wished there were more, especially when it comes to cellar-worthy reds. Some are confident that their wines defy vintage, believing consistency to be one of their strengths.

“We’re talking about what’s good to very good, rather than when you think of vintage variation in somewhere like Burgundy or elsewhere in Europe,” says Bec Hardy, a sixth-generation vintner in McLaren Vale who is managing director for Pertaringa. Over the past decade, she adds, only 2011 was a truly difficult year.

Others argue that vintage assessments are essential to telling the story of a wine. According to Chris Carpenter, winemaker at McLaren Vale’s Hickinbotham who also makes wine for Cardinale and Lokoya in Napa Valley, there are more extremes among Australia’s vintages than California’s. “In Napa, we get heat waves, but if one lasts a week, that’s really unusual. It’s usually three or four days,” Carpenter says. “But in Australia, those extremes can last a week or two. That can really affect the vine health in the rest of the vintage.”

Based on my tastings this year, I find Aussie winemakers justified in their excitement about sharing their wines—and the stories behind them—with American wine lovers. I recently met Nina Stocker and Callie Jemmeson, the winemaking duo behind Wine Unplugged, a brand that debuted in 2010 but whose wines are only now available in the U.S.

“What’s important is quality, and a sense of place in the wines,” says Stocker, describing her approach to winemaking. “But also a real, unpretentious kind of fun. The whole wine world is such a pleasure, and it is such a joy to pass that on to the person drinking it.” Stocker adds that when she and Jemmeson first walk into a vineyard, they’re already thinking about how to get the grapes into bottle with minimal additions.

“Once you start adding stuff, you’re changing what the fruit is,” she says. “And we both really like grapes, like grape juice.” Jemmeson laughs, “Yeah, lazy winemaking! I think it’s harder to not do things than it is to throw a bunch of tricks at a wine, right?”

“We had a really, really excellent vintage 2021, across all varieties and nearly all regions,” says Haines. “Everyone’s really buoyant and upbeat again, and I think there’s a really optimistic feel.”

In Margaret River, Peter Thompson of Thompson Estate is selling his wines again in the U.S. after years of focusing 20% of his sales on China. He believes his aromatic Cabernet-based wines will have a home in the U.S. “Things are very bright for us,” Thompson says. “A lot of people have been really passionate about Australian wine out there, and I feel like the tide is turning.”

*Senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec is Wine Spectator’s lead taster on the wines of Australia.*

## MaryAnn Worobiec’s Recommended Wines From Australia

More than 425 wines were reviewed for this report. A [free alphabetical list \[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-australian-wine-083121\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-australian-wine-083121) is available. **WineSpectator.com** members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

### HENSCHKE

Hill of Grace Vineyard Eden Valley 2016

Score: 98 | \$830

**WS Review:** This magnificent red is seamless, creamy and complex, delivering a balanced chorus of flavors. Full-bodied yet supple. Shiraz.

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### PENFOLDS

Shiraz South Australia Grange 2016

Score: 97 | \$800

**WS Review:** A dynamic red, balancing dark bass notes and fresh fruit. The tannins are dense and velvety, the flavors seamless and harmonious.

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