



Stephen Tanzer's

International Wine Cellar

## New Releases from Australia, Part 1

By Josh Raynolds - Jul/Aug 09

By now the Australian wine industry's problems have been well documented. Exchange rate fluctuations affect all areas of any economy, but as so much of the wine that Australia has been exporting to the U.S. is dirt-cheap, even the modest increase in prices here as a result of the stronger Australian dollar has significantly affected sales that are dependent on penny-pinching consumers. Australia's reliance and emphasis on the low end of the market is also giving its wines an undeservedly dicey image among many American collectors who are often motivated more by prestige than by actual quality when it comes to buying bottles. With a few notable exceptions the best Australian wines are largely ignored by American collectors, who tend to shun most New World wines anyway.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that many American winos who drove the high-end Aussie (mostly Barossa) market earlier this decade have simply grown tired of the over-the-top, high-alcohol, massively oaky style that defined that era in the U.S. market. And to be fair, many of those fruit, alcohol and oak bombs from the late 1990s and early 2000s have performed miserably with age. But rather than explore the breadth of styles offered by Australia (which is virtually unmatched in the New World), many consumers simply dismiss the category of Australian wine out of hand and move on to the next hot region, style or over-hyped vintage.

Two thousand seven wasn't the vintage that the already reeling Australian wine industry needed, except for the fact that the tragically low yields across the country did not further increase the country's overflowing inventory of unsold wine. Overall, yields were the lowest in 30 years, thanks to the full range of seasonal problems: brushfires, drought, extreme heat, frost, and maybe even some locusts. The crop in Coonawarra was off by 75% due to the frost, while brushfires in Victoria caused widespread smoke taint, resulting in many grapes being discarded. Across South Australia the fruit set was light and the grapes and bunches were small, resulting in low yields. But in the best cases the wines benefitted from the subsequent increase in concentration.

In Barossa and McLaren Vale, yields were down significantly (by around a third, on average) and much of the fruit was so overripe that it had to be pulled out before it ever got to the sorter. Meanwhile, almost 2,000 miles to the west, in the Margaret River region, conditions were warm but nowhere near the levels of South Australia or Victoria, and frost is generally not a problem in this breezy, ocean-influenced area. Both white and red grapes came in riper than normal but not far above the norm, yielding wines that will be fleshy and rich, with immediate appeal. In sum, the 2007 growing season has yielded some excellent wines but this is a vintage to choose from carefully, as it does not offer the consistency delivered by the previous three years across Australia.

Incidentally, the dramatic slowdown in sales of Australian wine in the U.S. means that many wines specifically crafted for American importers may no longer generate sufficient sales for the importer to continue purchasing grapes or finished wines to make these blends. I have heard several stories of growers or producers who had relied heavily on sales to négociants or American importers being left high and dry as their customers cut back or simply stopped buying. The bright side to this situation is that some excellent sources for high-quality grapes have opened up, and a few of the braver importers or négociant operations have jumped on them.



## New Releases from Australia continued ...

By all accounts we are enjoying a buyer's market for Australian wine right now, and great deals abound. Many wines from the generally excellent 2004, 2005 and 2006 vintages are being offered at ridiculously low prices considering the quality delivered. That's good for the short term but it's also potentially bad news for the medium and longer term if importers and wholesalers back away from Australia or simply close up shop. Most of those great deals floating around are the result of inventory liquidation or an importer simply going belly up, and fire-sale prices do no good for the image of high-quality Australian wine. If Australian wine is perceived as cheap or concocted (think of the dreaded critter wines), the best producers risk being tarred with same brush by the marketplace in spite of their hard work, low yields and world-class winemaking. A rising tide lift all ships but the opposite applies too.

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### REVIEWS

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#### 2007 Epicurean Bistro Grenache McLaren Vale, 89 Pts

Vivid red. Fresh red berries and cherry on the nose, with suave spice and herb notes adding interest. Pliant, tannin-free strawberry and raspberry flavors are brightened by tangy minerals and spices and betray no rough edges. Finishes on a sweet note, with good, spicy persistence. This wine was made by Stephen Pannell, maker of the S. C. Pannell wines.



#### 2006 S. C. Pannell Grenache (McLaren Vale) 93 Pts

Bright ruby-red. Vibrant raspberry, cherry, potpourri and incense on the sharply focused nose. Dense, juicy and sweet, with graceful strawberry and raspberry flavors and a supple, velour-like texture. Finishes very long, with gentle tannins and a strong note of candied flowers.



#### 2006 S. C. Pannell Shiraz (McLaren Vale) 93 Pts.

Opaque ruby. Powerful nose offers crushed blackberry, rose petal, Indian spices and a lively mineral note. Sweet and lush on entry, then spicy and intense in the middle palate, offering an impressive combination of red and black fruits. Ripe but fresh, with a juicy, strikingly long finish featuring notes of flowers and minerals.



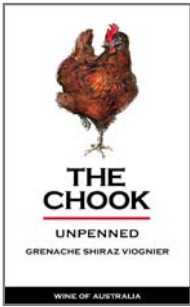
#### 2008 Spring Seed Wine Company Chardonnay 'Four O'Clock' (McLaren Vale) 89 Pts.

(made from organically grown grapes) Light yellow. Aromas of pineapple, nectarine and white peach, lifted by a whiff of apple skin. Dry and firm-edged, with a bitter quality adding interest to the pit and orchard fruit flavors. Racy acidity carries the fruit on the firm, focused finish. This grown-up rendition of chardonnay would work well by itself.



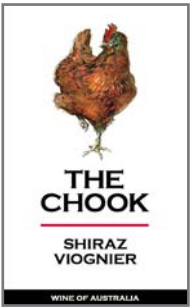
#### 2008 Spring Seed Wine Company Shiraz Scarlet Runner (McLaren Vale) 89 Pts.

(all organic grapes) Inky ruby color. Aromatically complex bouquet of dark berries, plum and cherry skin. Firmly built, offering fleshy black and blue fruit flavors and a note of bitter cherry. Tannins build on the focused, persistent finish.



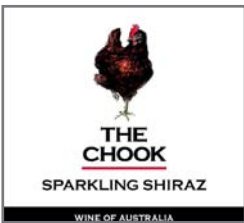
2008 The Chook Grenache-Shiraz-Viognier 'Unpenned' (South Australia) 90 Pts.

(50% grenache, 45% shiraz and 5% viognier) Deep ruby with a bright rim. Sexy aromas of raspberry, cassis, licorice and gingerbread, with a strong floral topnote. Fresh and spicy, boasting noteworthy definition to its red and dark berry flavors and a subtle note of smoky minerals. The finish strongly repeats the red fruit quality and hangs on tenaciously. This wine clocks in at 15% alcohol but I didn't notice it.



2008 The Chook Shiraz/Viognier (South Australia) 90 Pts.

(a 95/5 blend) Glass-staining ruby. Ripe aromas of black raspberry, licorice and a touch of vanilla. Generous and open, with a spicy quality to the sweet flavors of raspberry, cherry and candied violet. This delivers a lot of mid-palate sweetness and very good finishing clarity and spiciness.



NV The Chook Sparkling Shiraz (Australia) 87 Pts.

Bright violet color, with a frothy mousse. Intensely floral and spicy nose offers zesty strawberry and blueberry aromas and a hint of cracked pepper. Juicy, sweet dark berry flavors provide good palate coverage and become spicier with air. The blueberry note lingers on the juicy, finish. Serve this oddball with spicy cured meats and salty cheeses.

More reviews expected in Part II, due to print in August. *Stay tuned ....*

