



## Aussie! Aussie! Aussie!

Oy! Oy! Oy!

While there can be no argument regarding Australia's position at the forefront of possessing excessively cute local fauna (koalas, for example, or kangaroos, or Elle McPherson), her cultural contributions to the world social milieu, aside from providing inspiration for some choice Monty Python skits, has heretofore been a bit dodgy. Two thoughts on that regard: *Waltzing Mathilda* and Wine-in-a-box.

For the record, as far as songs about stealing sheep go, *Waltzing Mathilda* tops my list. And while Australia still holds its position as the Mecca of box wines, let me dispel the myth that Aussie wines aren't as good as those of France, Italy or California. Quality Australian Shirazes and Cabernets possess a distinctive philosophical flair, an inescapably delicious exuberance, and a tendency to knock your socks off—no one said that Aussies were subtle.

The Australian wine industry has grown virtually every known varietal since its inception in 1790, but Aussie winemakers' talents run towards producing BARs: Big-Assed Reds. Produced predominantly in Victoria (think Melbourne-ish) and South Australia (Adelaide-ish), Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon are crafted to showcase the enormous dark-fruit flavors these varietals are capable of displaying. Tannins are relatively soft, so that they can be consumed young without your being subjected to the mouth-scouring sensation of sucking black tea-bags (a hallmark of some California Cabernets). As I feel that these wines wonderfully display the *Waltzing Mathilda* ethos of Australia we forego the usual White/Red dichotomy, and dive headlong into a duo of Dinki-di BARs.

Cheers!

Anton Hicks & The Wine Counsel Staff

### 2000 Two Hands — McLaren Vale Shiraz McLaren Vale, Australia 100% Shiraz



#### The Two Hands

Although it is Barossa Valley that has become synonymous with producing blockbuster Australian Shirazes, much in the way Napa Valley's name has become inextricable from the concept of the California Cabernet Sauvignon, we thought we might meander a bit South to McLaren Vale to find our Discovery Series Shiraz. Two Hands might be unfamiliar to even the most die-hard of Aussie Shiraz fans—for the moment, that comes as no surprise, as their premiere vintage has only just hit the markets and has yet to be rated by the "pen-is-mightier-than-the-wine-glass" Robert Parker. Relative and blessed obscurity should last until October's issue of the *Wine Advocate*, in which Parker will no doubt pee his pants describing just how much he likes the portfolio.

The hands behind the label are old ones in the Aussie wine biz: Michael Twelftree, marketer extraordinaire, and winemaker Rolf Binder. Rolf Binder, who looks remarkably like a snide Klaus Maria Brandauer and holds the coveted position in my heart as "most-favored-Aussie-winemaker" crafts the most ridiculously concentrated and decadent Shirazes known to man—J.J. Hahn 1914 Block, Veritas Hanisch and the Magpie Estate Black Sock to name a few.

#### Vales and Mountains—Cheerleaders and Philosophers

A little rule of thumb to keep in mind when perusing labels: wines made from valley floor (or in this case, Vale) vineyards tend towards less tannin and structure and generally possess more fruit; mountain vineyards produce wines that tend towards introspection, eschewing vivaciousness for layered complexity. For anyone who's spent time in L.A., this should be a mnemonic no-brainer: cheerleaders come from the Valley (and philosophers live in the mountains). McLaren Vale produces wines as unrepentantly huge as Barossa Valley, and the Two Hands Shiraz is no exception. Dark, brooding (sulking perhaps?), the McLaren Vale Shiraz sports a deep, rich color immediately indicating an impressive concentration of flavors; the nose is a heady perfume of spice with a deep core of plummy, jet-black fruit. On the palate, it reveals silk-alicious, fine-grained tannins, harmonizing well with the oak and seductive hints of cedar, cloves and a perfectly aged Cohiba cigar. Foolishly concentrated, I'd let this breathe for at least an hour after opening before pouring yourself a glass. I suspect it will only develop into more over the next decade, but why wait? It's yummy stuff, so bottoms up, mate!

#### You say "potato", I'll say "pot-ah-to"

Aside from the charming twang a good Aussie will give to the word, is there a difference between Shiraz and Syrah? Well, yes and no. The "no" half of the equation refers to the congenerous relationship between Aussie Shiraz and American and European Syrahs—chromosomally speaking, they are vinous kissing cousins. On a stylistic level, however, each has taken its divergent road in the wood.

Aussie Shiraz, when well done, is rich, concentrated, and boasts enormous jammy fruit (thanks to the relentlessly pleasant weather Down Under), with the sort of mouth-caressing soft tannins vaguely reminiscent of chewing on a tasty swatch of finely crafted velvet (I don't, by the way, recommend this). Poorly done, Aussie Shirazes aren't bad, but are simple, pleasant one-dimensional affairs—excellent wines for quaffing with pizza. Syrahs, and especially those of France, possess the same inky concentration of their more extroverted brethren, but tend towards heavier tannins, peppery spice and philosophical introversion. When finely crafted, these Syrahs can age magnificently and become impressively complex over time...on the other hand, when things don't quite work out, Syrahs of the Northern Rhone can be nastily peppery, bitterly astringent, and on bad hair days, smelling as if someone had set fire to a stack of Michelins.

In a sincere show of flattery, as of late, there have been an increasing number of producers imitating the Aussie Shiraz style of winemaking, particularly so here in California. While we haven't yet discovered one that truly stands shoulder to shoulder with Australia's finest, we'll keep our eyes peeled.

**1998 Penley Estate — Phoenix  
Coonawara Australia  
100% Cabernet Sauvignon**



### Penley Estate Wines

After dawdling about Mudgee for our Shiraz of the month, we promptly head back down to the Southern end of Australia to find our Cabernet pick. Coonawara arguably (depending on with whom you choose to argue) possesses the perfect soil and climate for the growing of Cabernet Sauvignon in Australia—the perfect balance of steady weather, slightly cooler temperatures, and the famed Terra Rossa. They're no slouches at producing outstanding Shirazes as well as excellent Chardonnays and Rieslings to boot.

### The 1998 Phoenix

1998 produced an outstanding vintage for Australian wines, the harvested grapes bursting with a profusion of deep black fruit flavors. The 1998 Phoenix virtually gushes forth with flavors of plums, currants, and smoky licorice, but still manages to maintain some semblance of balance. And above it all, the classic scent of an Aussie Cabernet, that whiff of menthol-ly mint that adds a great little sensation of zip.

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### A Bit of Blending Madness

We'd selected two single-varietal wines for this Discovery Series shipment, a Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon respectively, as we felt that these two perfectly captured the hedonistic opulence of Australian reds, but we'd be remiss if we failed to give some mention of the profusion of red blends being produced Down Under. The general tendency is to use Rhone varietals in these blends, utilizing a core of Shiraz with Grenache, and Mouvedre blended in—the Holy Trinity in Australian wine parlance, and often referred to as a GSM (Grenache Shiraz Mouvedre). Equally willing to mimic Bordeaux blends, there are also a number of excellent Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot based blends, into which the Aussies, in a show of devotion to their Shiraz, blend in a bit of the S and—uh, well—a little of the M. Rosemount has several wonderful blends in its portfolio, including a perennially good GSM.

Towards the funkycoolsexy end of the blending spectrum comes the Rhone invention of mixing white and reds together to get...no, not rosés, but blockbuster reds with a beautiful floral note to the nose. These blends which combine Shiraz with the aromatic white varietal Vignier are stunningly beautiful, showing all the muscular power of a Shiraz with a grace note of floral beauty lilting angelically. For a wonderful example of the Aussie version of this, try a bottle of the D'Arenberg Laughing Magpie Shiraz, available from our Cellar Rarities selection. You'll love it. And if you're like us, you might even fall in love.

We introduce a new section in our Discovery Series Newsletter after receiving feedback from an aspiring collector who wanted suggestions on what other wines to purchase based upon what they'd discovered during the course of trying their monthly shipment. In doing this, we realized how woefully inadequate our own cellar was, and have stepped up purchasing accordingly. If we don't have something on hand, however, we'll help you get a hold of it

If you took a shining to the Shiraz, you're in luck: there are innumerable, amazingly good Aussie Shirazes out there for not terribly obscene prices. We currently have the **D'Arenberg Laughing Magpie Shiraz** and the **D'Arenberg Dead Arm Shiraz**, both of which are outstanding, almost outrageously rich wines. For wine with a bit more of a spice character, why not try one of Two Hands? If the **Two Hands McClaren Vale Shiraz** is deep and brooding, its more gregarious sibling, the **Two Hands Padthaway Shiraz**, exhibits tantalizing scents of nutmeg and cinnamon. Absolutely delicious. There are no end of high-end Shirazes as well, wine that will make you sit down hard on your bum and make your tongue flap about in ecstasy. If temptation beckons, you know where to send your email requests.

In this land of blending, finding a pure, unblended Cabernet might be a bit of a challenge, but if you can handle a more liberal interpretation of

Cabernet, there's plenty of pleasure in store for your tastebuds. Penfolds produces excellent Cab blends in the lower price ranges. Two other names to remember in relation to Australian Cabernets: **Noon** and **Fox Creek**. Both of these wineries produce amazingly good Cabs that truly exemplify the pinnacle of the varietal's potential Down Under. Not surprisingly, these may be rather hard to get a hold of (and not cheap either!), but they are, I assure you, very well worth it.

And while we haven't spent all too much time discussing Aussie whites, there are some wonderful Chardonnays and Semillons worth finding. **Penfolds Yattarna Chardonnay** is always phenomenally good, as is **Leeuwin's Art Series Chardonnay**. Splurge and try them—you'll wish you could afford these every night. For those who haven't yet had the opportunity to sip an Aussie Semillon, you're missing out on an experience. Semillons are interesting animals as they improve dramatically with age. Drunk young, they can be crisp and pleasant—a few years under the belt helps the transformation. Amongst the Semillons, try **Tim Adams'** compelling ambrosia.

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