

Australia's other gift to the world



Shiraz occupies a special place in Australia's wine culture, with its arrival date here generally recognised as 1832 and the man responsible for this arrival named as James Busby. However, its position as a table wine here has really only been about 60 years in the making, as it was a predominantly fortified grape up until the 1950s. Brent Balinski takes a snapshot of Australia's best loved red varietal.

Shiraz: The early years

James Busby, a civil servant, educator, author and viticultural pioneer, led a life as full and richly varied as the collection of vines he took back with him from his 1831 visit to France and Spain. His life story is far too busy and detailed to be summarised in this article, but his Franco-Spanish vine collecting expedition is essential to mention. According to John Beeston's *A Concise History of Australian Wine*, Busby collected 543 varieties of vine during his 1831 jaunt, 362 of which survived and were transplanted into the Sydney Botanical Gardens. There were bulk wine grapes, for example Gordo Blanco; Sherry types, including Pedro Ximinez and Palomino; and French classics, such as Merlot and Shiraz.

Shiraz is often referred to outside of Australia as Syrah and has previously been labelled here as 'Hermitage'. Unless it's necessary to do otherwise, the varietal will be referred to as Shiraz in this article.

The birthplace of Shiraz can differ, depending on who's telling the story. Some of the more colourful accounts hold that it was brought to France during the crusades from Shiraz, which was a part of what was then known as Persia and is now referred to as Iran. The spoils of holy war were then planted on the hill of Hermitage. This tale is most likely incorrect and the truth is probably a little blander. DNA tests have shown Shiraz is the child of two wild French vines from Savoy and Puy de Dome, which got together in the Rhone Valley a couple of thousand years ago. Robert Geddes MW in *A Good Nose and Great Legs* put it this way: "Shiraz is understood to be a cross between the now obscure white mondeuse blanche and the extinct dureza."

After arriving here in 1832, Shiraz thrived and proved to be nicely suited to Australia's climates, much as Busby predicted, with its ability to deal with heat, drought and soil that isn't always as lush as it is elsewhere. After coming to Sydney, it took root in the Hunter and then spread rapidly across the land. "Currently in Australia Shiraz is the most widely planted grape variety, representing almost half of all red wine grapes crushed each vintage," was a statistic Annabel Atkins, Marketing Manager, Fox Gordon, cited to demonstrate Australia's love affair with the varietal.

Katherine Candy, Brand Manager, Wyndham Estate, contends that Wyndham beat Busby to the punch and made the first planting of Shiraz grapes in this country. "English immigrant George Wyndham pioneered the Australian wine industry by planting Australia's first commercial Shiraz vineyard at Dalwood, along the bank of the Hunter River, New South Wales, in 1830" said Candy. "Dalwood Wines operated until 1970, when the winery was renamed Wyndham Estate in honour of George Wyndham: The father of Australian Shiraz."

Nowadays it's something Australia is renowned the world over for. After its early years (and up to the middle of the 20th century) as predominantly a fortified wine grape, Shiraz has grown into our best loved red varietal. The 2009 edition of the *Australian and New Zealand Wine Industry Directory* shows that 80% of wine producers make Shiraz, in front of Cabernet Sauvignon (70% of producers) and Chardonnay (69%).

An Australian export success story, Australian Shiraz has seen other nations such as the US, Argentina and NZ fighting over recent years to regain marketshare from us. But with so many Shiraz's out there, what should one be looking for?

Some features

A Shiraz's colour and flavour profiles will differ with the climate and soil the vineyard grows in.

The colour of a glass of Shiraz ranges from medium red to nearly black in some of the heavier incarnations, with purple tinges in



between. Aged Shiraz's will take on a delightful, tawny hue. Shiraz's can demonstrate spice, cinnamon, anis and berry aromas, and a velvety, tannic mouthfeel, which can give impressions of earthiness and even seem 'chewy'. The mid-palate can be tricked into detecting sweetness from fruit flavours and an often high alcohol/volume level.

Grown in cooler climates, Shiraz can display black pepper notes, with berry flavours, a high acid structure and medium amounts of body. Warmer climate Shiraz tends to be less acidic and less intense than cool climate Shiraz. It also features plum and spice and earthy, tannic tones. Katnook, located in the Coonawarra region, specialises in "classic cool climate Shiraz," explained Wayne Stehbins, Senior Winemaker, Katnook Estate. "It's a difficult variety to grow due to the vagaries of the weather, but the cool climate Shiraz here is set apart from warmer regional styles. Katnook Estate Shiraz is aromatic, with plenty of sweet spice, such as anise and pepper."

The amount of sunlight Shiraz grapes are exposed to also has a strong influence on the wine's flavour. The flavour in red wine grapes comes mainly from the grapes' skins, where tannins and polyphenols are present. These are influenced by the amount of sunlight they get exposed to, the reason why vine canopy management and latitude make a difference to grapes used in wines.

Shiraz berries are small to medium in size and they grow into cylinder-like bunches. They shrivel with maturation on the vine due to water loss. If Shiraz is picked too late it can risk having insufficient acid levels and also end up 'jammy' or 'raisiny', something best avoided. A lack of natural acidity can mean tartaric acid has to be added for fermentation.

Shiraz is a little like Zinfandel, observed Steve Pitcher, US wine critic, in that Shiraz has been viewed in this country as a sort of "Workhorse grape - much as Californians regard Zinfandel - used to produce inexpensive, yet flavourful wines, very appropriate for everyday drinking." Yet Shiraz at its best had grown into a variety with huge amounts of international distinction and prestige, through wines like Penfolds Grange for one well-known example.

Regional characteristics have a lot to do with setting Shiraz's apart from each other. Constellation Wines produce Shiraz from numerous regions, and, according to Simon Osicka, Group Red Winemaker, "How each of these regions differ is no simple answer, as Australia is such a vast country, capable of producing so many flavours and styles. We produce Shiraz wines with the focus on displaying distinctive regional

expressions," offered Osicka, whose company's Shiraz's include those from Margaret River, Mount Barker, Frankland River, Padthaway/Wrattonbully, Adelaide Hills, McLaren Vale, Clare Valley, The Pyrenees and the Barossa.

Barossa and Shiraz

The Barossa, a region steeped in tradition, has a long and proud history with Shiraz. The climate is warm in the lower reaches, but can be cooler at elevated areas. It is home to some of the oldest known Shiraz vineyards. Old vine Shiraz produces lower yields than newer vines, but older wines gain concentrated fruit flavours and delightful, ripe tannin structures.

Barossans are extremely fortunate that they avoided, "The terrible Phylloxera outbreak that devastated Europe and the East Coast so that we can now boast some of the oldest Shiraz vineyards in the world," said Toby Yap, Regional Sales Manager, Langmeil Winery. "Langmeil's oldest winery, the Freedom, was planted in 1843 and survives to this day." The region is rightfully proud of its Shiraz's, and many vineyards honour the tradition of their Lutheran ancestors, who fled religious persecution at the hands of Kaiser Wilhem III in the 1800's. "They came out to their new homeland, from persecution to freedom, to worship in our beloved Barossa," told Yap. "The Freedom is Langmeil's first and foremost vineyard."

Malcolm Stopp, National PR Manager, Peter Lehmann Wines (PLW), fondly recalled Peter Lehmann's old saying, "That when God created Shiraz, he did so with the Barossa in mind..." Barossans would agree!

Grant Burge is another Barossan maker honouring old vine Shiraz and the region's tradition. "From our first vintage in 1988, it stood out that Shiraz was going to be our flagship wine," said Grant Burge, Managing Director, Grant Burge Wines. "I am lucky enough to not only have developed vineyards, but also to have purchased some of the Barossa's oldest, led by my Filsell Shiraz block, which goes into my flagship wine: Meschach." Tash Mooney, Chief Winemaker, Fox Gordon, is also a believer in the Barossa's ability to grow great grapes. "I aim to create the very best Shiraz possible from the four reputable Barossa vineyards we source fruit from."

Stopp (PLW) acknowledged the history that makes the region what it is. "Many vineyards remain planted on their own rootstocks, which are direct descendants of cuttings brought to Australia in the early 1800's from Hermitage in the Rhone Valley," he stated. "And this makes the Barossa the envy of the wine world."



James Halliday's 2006 *Wine Atlas of Australia* gives the Barossa's low point as the 1970's. Tastes were swinging around from red to white wines, fortifieds (often sourced from Shiraz) had fallen out of favour and cool climate wines were fashionable. Soon after this, the 1987 SA Government Vine Pull scheme was introduced to combat the grape glut at the time, ironically removing lower yielding old vines (and replacing these with higher yielding new ones). The prudent Barossan growers who declined Government subsidies for reeving out their vines, such as Robert O'Callaghan of Rockford and Bob McLean of St Hallett, were instrumental in saving old vines during those times, wrote Patrick Iland and Peter Gago, in *Australian Wine: From the Vine to the Glass*.

**So many Shiraz's,
so many regions,
so little time**

With a wine as ubiquitous as Shiraz, the competition is high to make a product that stands out. Do winemakers need to do anything dramatic to stand out from the crowd?

"We have the word 'dead' in our name," joked Chester Osborn, Chief Winemaker, d'Arenberg Wines, referring to The Dead Arm Shiraz. He then flicked the switch back to 'serious' and described the d'Arenberg style as, "A cross between Europe and Australia. We have oak integration, tightness, floweriness and soil expression," in their Shiraz.

Mark Lane, Winemaker, Balgownie Estate, expressed the consensus that regional characteristics are important in defining a Shiraz. "Central Victorian Shiraz, in particular Bendigo Shiraz, has established a solid reputation on producing wines of elegance and spice," he said. "In some sub-regions the spice tends to pepper. Due to the excellent ripening conditions, Bendigo Shiraz does not get jammy or over-alcoholic."

An interesting region-related feature regarding Shiraz was noted by Geddes MW and author. He wrote that tannins increase as one moves away from the coast, with inland regions, such as the Barossa, producing Shiraz's more tannic than those nearer to the coast, such as McLaren Vale or Langhorne Creek.

Travis Fuller, Senior Brand Manager, [yellow tail], stated that his brand, like many others, married different regional characteristics to produce their take on the varietal. "From the full-bodied warmer climate wines to the fine and spicy cooler climate offerings, Shiraz was capable of great variations across regions," said Fuller. "The great advantage that [yellow tail]

has is that we source our fruit from across many of these differing regions and then blend them together to produce a high quality, consistent and flavoursome wine that shows the hallmarks of the varietal." In a broadly similar way, Thorn-Clark Wines sees strength in diversity when it comes to its Shiraz. "Thorn-Clark wines are fortunate to be one of the largest private vineyard owners in the Barossa and Eden Valley. This allows Derek, our winemaker, plenty of blending options from the four sites totalling over 600 acres," claimed Ben Chapman, Australian Marketing Manager, Thorn-Clark Wines. "An example of the options available is the use of our cooler climate Eden Valley fruit with fruit from the valley floor to ensure that we don't fall into the 'overripe' category. We aim for Shiraz that is typical Barossa: well balanced and excellent value."

Moving across to WA, Kim Horton, Senior Winemaker, Ferngrove, claimed that his brand was lucky enough to have 'almost perfect' conditions for growing their fruit. He said that science backs up his point. "A study of the Frankland River Climate by Dr John Gladstones; a respected scientist, academic and the man credited with uncovering the potential of the Margaret River wine region; in December 2000 showed it to be very well suited to Shiraz," recalled Horton. "The theoretical explanation is that it will produce cool climate wine styles comparable to those of the upper Rhone region in France, but with greater reliability. According to Dr Gladstones, few places so nearly match the theoretical ideal of this famous wine growing region... Our Shiraz has intense colour, depth, concentration and flesh, but with the subtleties of spice, pristine fine tannin and amazing length."

Elsewhere out west, Watershed of Margaret River claim a region that is, "Definitely making people stand up and take notice when it comes to producing top quality Shiraz," said Tony Brandtman, National Sales and Marketing Manager. "Not normally thought of as the region's star, Watershed in particular has produced award winning Shiraz from 2001... The medium-bodied fruit driven style of Shiraz from Margaret River, together with its amazing elegance and balance, definitely sets Margaret River apart from some of the other prime Shiraz regions."

Although some brands wear their regional identity on their sleeve when it comes to certain varietals, not all do. Tyrrell's Wines, though identified with and based in the Hunter, does not consider its Shiraz to be associated with the region in the same way as companies like McWilliam's and Rosemount Estate's are. Tyrrell's aims to, "Transcend regional identity as

we produce Shiraz in three key areas: the Hunter Valley, McLaren Vale and the new emerging Shiraz hotspot, Heathcote in Victoria," said Mike Cutrupi, Sales and Marketing Manager, Tyrrell's Wines. "All three styles are very representative of their regions and offer the consumer the true varietal with regional character."

Pete Mortimer, Owner, Mortimers Wines, makes Shiraz at the region of Orange, which, "Is gaining recognition for its Shiraz." He believes that, "The shale ridge through our vineyard makes the vines work hard and produces smaller, but intense yields."

Jason O'Dea, Marketing Manager, Windowrie Estate, said that Cowra is a region where a growing number of people are seeking out its Shiraz. "Cowra Shiraz is beginning to generate a bit of a following," he has noticed. "This has been seen with such accolades as a Cowra Shiraz being judged Best Red Wine in NSW at the 2008 NSW Wine Awards, as well as a number of other Cowra Shiraz and Shiraz Viognier, receiving excellent reviews from a number of respected wine journalists."

Mixes well with others

Though Australia's favourite red wine varietal, Shiraz is often blended with others and blends such as Shiraz Viognier have been

gaining traction in recent times. Nobody interviewed for this article believed that Shiraz was losing ground as a standalone varietal, but it has always been and continues to be a varietal with strong blending potential.

David Morris, Winemaker, Morris Wines, was someone that highlighted Shiraz's ability to blend. "Shiraz is a great blender in complementing other varieties like the classic Australian blend of Shiraz and Cabernet and the newer creation of Shiraz and Viognier."

Matt Redin, Marketing Manager, Angove Family Wines, stated that maybe the greatest challenge to standalone Shiraz's dominance could be from Shiraz Viognier. Angove's, "Co-fermented Shiraz, 94%, and Viognier, 6%, to craft the Nine Vines Viognier," explained Redin. "The Viognier and Shiraz work seamlessly together to enhance the varietal Shiraz characteristics... It has had huge sales success following a Gold Medal performance at last year's Royal Adelaide show against some more fancied wines retailing at over four times the price." Adam Chapman, Chief Winemaker, Sirromet, identified Granite Belt region Shiraz as, "Quite different to the other chocolate-rich dense styles around Australia. It is mid-weighted and suits the Viognier blend, which makes it more complete." Indeed, more and more winemakers seem to be seeking the synergies of a blend of Shiraz and Viognier.

Osborn and his company, d'Arenberg, were early adopters of the en vouge blend, "with the Laughing Magpie Shiraz Viognier," he said. "Yarra Yering pioneered the style, but didn't mention the blend on the label. Clonakilla did and then it was Yalumba and d'Arenberg producing decent volumes that spread the word about this blend.

"We are experimenting with other white grapes for co-fermenting. The Wild Pixie, a Shiraz Rousanne blend, will be released at the end of the year," said Osborn (d'Arenberg).

Jan Burke, Marketing and Sales Manager, Xabregas, claimed emphatically, "Shiraz is not losing ground as a standalone varietal. Our sales alone in this variety have increased by 70% in the past year." However, "Perhaps the style of Shiraz preferred is changing; less up front and more elegance is maybe being sought by consumers."

Although the blend of Shiraz and Viognier seems to be all the rage, Shiraz has long been a varietal used in blends, for example in its home in the Rhone Valley, where it is blended with varieties such as Durif, Mourvedre and Grenache. The tried and true blend of Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon, Australia's two most

popular red varietals, has never gone away. Atkins (Fox Gordon) believes Shiraz Cabernet, "Is sitting in the back blocks, ready to make a comeback. With a history stretching back over a century, the Shiraz Cabernet blend will always have a place in the heart of Australians due to the magic combination of the pronounced fruit of Shiraz coupled with the length of palate and tannin structure of Cabernet."

Yap (Langmeil) also believes that there's room in the market for more Shiraz Cabernet blends and observed, "A great representation of outstanding lower end Shiraz Cabernet blends making a resurgence into the market place."

Enduring popularity

Winemakers don't expect straight Shiraz to go out of fashion any time soon. Stehbens (Katnook Estate), said, "Our sales figures suggest Shiraz is holding its own as a standalone variety. It accounts for 25% of our total tonnage for the Founder's Block, Katnook Estate and Prodigy Estate brands."

Burge (Grant Burge Wines) also doesn't see Shiraz waning in popularity anytime soon. "Top Shiraz is a dominant figure in the Australian wine landscape and makes up two of my leading wines: Meschach and Filsell," he said. "Looking back on my 40 years in the wine game, I remember Cabernet Sauvignon dominated that first 20 years, but for the past two decades it has all been about Shiraz." Ben Haines, Winemaker, Mitchelton, agrees that good Shiraz, with all the possible regional variations, will always have a place. "Shiraz will continue to dominate as a varietal in its own right," he predicted. "The sheer range of styles and regional expressions, along with the popularity of Australian Shiraz abroad, should ensure it doesn't become a 'fashion victim', particularly as winemakers and consumers continue to experiment."

Indeed, despite enjoying its status as the number one red varietal, Shiraz doesn't seem to be slowing down, as Fuller (Casella) pointed out. "Shiraz continues to grow strongly, up 7.4% on volume and 4.6% in value, according to Nielsen ScanTrack MAT at the end of February."

Does your outlet have a story involving Shiraz? Could you imagine a store or bar without it? Tell us more.