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Harvey Steiman At Large

Contrasts in Australia

Posted: 05:57 PM ET, April 13, 2007

Anyone who thinks all Australian wines are alike should have been tasting with me the past couple of days. At three wineries within greater Adelaide, all of which have achieved outstanding ratings, you couldn't find three more different approaches.

My plane landed Thursday and I headed right out to Adelaide Hills to see Michael Hill-Smith and Martin Shaw at their [Shaw & Smith](#) winery, which makes Australia's touchstone Sauvignon Blanc. They had the audacity to pour their [Chardonnay M3 2001](#) and M. Sauzet Puligny-Montrachet 2002 over a lunch of sautéed whiting fillets. The M3 had considerably more finesse and charm.

Hill-Smith is a Master of Wine. He knows the world wine landscape, from Burgundy to Napa Valley, and he wants to make wines that "bust the stereotype," as he puts it, of Aussie wines as sunny, cheerful and soulless. He and his cousin, Shaw, built a no-nonsense steel-shed winery next to their vineyard, which is across the lane from another Adelaide Hills mainstay, [Nepenthe](#). It's a relatively cool climate, and it suits the winery's emphasis on wines of lighter texture and crisp balance, without sacrificing the ripe generosity that makes Australia Australia. Even their Shiraz has a lilt to it.

Yesterday afternoon in a suburban Adelaide business park, I found Sparky and Sarah Marquis, who launched their own brand, [Mollydooker](#), last year after an [acrimonious breakup](#) with their longtime partner in [Marquis Philips](#), Dan Philips of the Grateful Palate. Finesse has little to do with their heady, high-octane, ultraripe wines—except in the texture, where they rate their wines on "fruit weight." In their lexicon, that's how long the fruit flavors last in your mouth before you become aware of the underlying tannins, acidity and alcohol.

They were in the midst of bottling their second vintage, 2006, and Sparky had to excuse himself several times from our tasting to chat with his associate at the bottling line. They have added a few more wines to the portfolio, including a \$175 Shiraz called Velvet Glove, and a surprisingly supple and currant-filled Merlot called The Scooter at about one-fourth that price.

In between, I spent the morning at [Magill Estate](#), Penfolds' home winery, tasting nearly four dozen wines with the chief winemaker, Peter Gago. A generous soul, he opened older versions of all the new vintages of Penfolds classics, including [Grange](#). They can do that at Penfolds, which has an uninterrupted history going back to the 1840s. It's now owned by Foster's, the brewing giant that includes [Wolf Blass](#) and [Beringer](#) in its portfolio. To Gago's relief, the honchos at Foster's have kept hands off the winemaking of the historic wines, such as Grange, Bin 707 and [St. Henri](#).

Although Grange has a reputation for being a big, broad-shouldered wine, in the scheme of things it's not. Ripe? Yes. Big? Not in today's world. At dinner the other night, Michael Twelftree, whose [Two Hands](#) winery has been turning heads, brought along a bottle of [Domaine du Pégaü Châteauneuf-du-Pape Cuvée Réservee 2003](#), which my colleague [James Molesworth](#) rated 97 points. It's a big, heady, Port-like wine that you sort of sink into like a big, overstuffed bed.

Here's the thing. Nothing Penfolds makes, not Grange, not RWT, not Bin 707 or even the majestic once-every-10-years [Block 42 Cabernet](#), is even close to the Pégaü for alcohol and ultraripeness. The big Mollydooker wines out-muscle the Pégaü but the Velvet Glove just might give it a run for its money on complexity and sheer dazzle. But Shaw & Smith's Chardonnay, showing remarkably silky texture and definite touches of lime and mineral around a core of subtle peach and apple fruit, came off as the more elegant and lively side-by-side at lunch with E. Sauzet Puligny-Montrachet.

Sort of makes you think about where Australia fits in the spectrum of wine styles, doesn't it?

6 comments on this post

Reader Comments

User Name: **Michael Twelftree, Barossa, Australia** Posted: **04:36 AM ET, April 14, 2007**

Harvey, We actually had the 2003 Pegau da Capo that James Molesworth gave 99 and Bob Parker 100+ in his Hedonist Gazette. I am having the final glass tonight, some two nights later and it has settled down a great deal and continues to make quite a statement. Glad we have got great weather for your visit but man do we need the rain! MT

User Name: **Dave Joyce, Winston-Salem, NC** Posted: **01:30 PM ET, April 14, 2007**

Harvey, Did Sparky say anything about the size of his 2006 vintage compared to the 2005? His distributor in our area is starting the "much smaller production" whines already. That is probably code for "you supported us when the wine was new but now that we are established we are going to cut your allocation so we can give it to others", but it would be nice to know what Sparky and Sarah said.

This sounds like a great trip. Michael's Two Hands wines, and all the various great producers that Sparky and Sarah have had a hand in are certainly favorites of our customers, and me personally. Now if you can visit Chris Ringland, and Kim Johnston (and the Longbottoms at Henry's Drive/Parson's Flat), your trip would be complete, if it isn't already.

By the time you get back it may be tough to bleach the Shiraz stains off your hands and teeth!

User Name: **James B Seder, newton, ma** Posted: **06:15 PM ET, April 14, 2007**

Harvey- Any follow ups on the '04 Block 42 and Bin 60A Penfolds? Jim

User Name: **Harvey Steiman, San Francisco, CA** Posted: **08:52 PM ET, April 14, 2007**

As far as I know, 2006 was a normal-size vintage in South Australia. Mollydooker is introducing several new wines but keeping the production at 40-45,000 cases. That may be what the distributor was whining about. Inevitably, if the wines catch on, demand will exceed supply.

This vintage (2007), however, is another story. Everyone I've spoken with so far is down at least 20 to 30 percent. Some vineyards weren't even harvested, there were so few grapes. Sarah said they got about 70 percent of what they expected.

User Name: **Harvey Steiman, San Francisco, CA** Posted: **08:56 PM ET, April 14, 2007**

I did taste the 2004 Block 42 and Bin 60A, and they are as I reviewed them in November 2005. Block 42 is a great, great wine and Bin 60A is only a couple of ticks behind. Alas, they are all pre-sold.

User Name: **Sparky Marquis** Posted: **01:13 AM ET, April 15, 2007**

dave, this is janet, sparky's mum here. the allocations are already out and have already all been taken up by distributors/retailers. we want to support everybody in the trade who has supported us (thanks guys), so we encourage you to try for your wines there. but if you can't find what you want, go to buymollydooker.com (you will also find there the info on the wines which will help you to decide what you would like to order from your retailer). Michael, thanks for your always generous and supportive attitude. You are an example of the joyous and celebratory spirit of winemaking. Harvey it was great to spend time with you. Sparks knew what to expect but Sarah and I had expected a 'critic' and instead found an understanding and appreciative wine and people lover. Thanks for coming.

Submit your comments

User Name: **Michael Quinttus**