

Discovering the Wines of Australia

Ben Shewry moved from his home of New Zealand to Australia about 20 years ago. A young chef, he came to study, train, and learn. He was amazed by the flavors and textures of the native ingredients of Australia, and perplexed by the lack of interest Australians took in them. He became a great champion for these ingredients—fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices with names like lilly pilly, desert lime, quandong, lemon myrtle, and gumbi gumbi. Marron, kangaroo, emu, wallaby, and jumbuck became his proteins of choice. He [helped teach the world](#)—and perhaps most importantly, Australians—that these ingredients could be just as grand and delicious as the international ingredients and techniques that had up until then defined fine dining.

In 2017, Ben Shewry hired a young(ish) American woman to run his beverage program at Attica. She had an experience with the country's wine much like what Ben experienced years before with the native ingredients of Australia: excitement, amazement, and awe that these world-class wines were being made in Australia's own backyard, and confusion as to why local sommeliers didn't seem to care.



In November 2016, I was ready for a change. I had been at Eleven Madison Park for two years—two years of hard work and astounding growth—and it was time for something different. My original plan was to study for my Masters and work on a writing project, but soon after I gave my notice, I was offered an opportunity to work at one of the best restaurants in Australia. It came up casually at first, and both Jon, then my boyfriend and now my fiancé, and I laughed and brushed it off. *Move to Australia? That's crazy.* But as the opportunity started to become more real, we decided the crazy thing would be *not* going.

I had a Skype interview with Ben Shewry and his business manager, and they seemed like good people committed to doing important things. I thought I would be offered the job, and I was now convinced that I would want to take it: an opportunity to be part of a significant restaurant, explore a new world of wine, and live and travel in a new locale. Jon came home from work late that night, sat down on the couch, and, without any conversation, said, "Let's move to Australia."



In New York, we drank European wine. Our home cellar (that is, wine fridge, under-the-couch shoe boxes, *pupitre* in the kitchen, wall-mounted shelves, and stand-up wine rack) was filled with Chablis, Chambolle-Musigny, Barolo, Côte Rôtie, and the Rheingau. We loved the humble and grand Sangiovese of Chianti Classico, the spritzly reds of the Jura, and the up-and-coming producers of Germany playing outside of

traditional Prädikat levels. A few bottles from the New World dotted our shelves: often wines for blind tastings (Mendoza Malbec, Central Coast Viognier), a few older vintages of wines we were curious about (Littorai and Calera Pinot Noir, Kalin late-harvest Chardonnay), and a rare bottle or two of American wine we bought because we liked drinking it as much as European wine (Arnot Roberts Trousseau and Hermann J. Wiemer Riesling come to mind).

I had been on a few wine trips in Northern California and visited the Finger Lakes once, but American wine travel wasn't a huge priority for me. To this day, I've never been to the vineyards of the Willamette Valley, Santa Barbara, anywhere in Washington State, and—probably the most embarrassing of them all—I've never visited the wine regions of Long Island. I chose to stay home, and drink European wine, rather than venture out in my own backyard.



I was excited to explore Australia's wine regions but did not anticipate *actually* liking the wines. I imagined visiting Beechworth, Yarra Valley, or Macedon Ranges, then returning home and enjoying a bottle of Barolo.

My first visit to an Australian bottle shop was a rude awakening. I walked down the aisles of my familiar favorites and did a double take. Bourgogne Rouge starting at \$75, Chianti Classico no cheaper than \$50, current-vintage German Spätlese starting at \$60—and forget about buying a decent bottle of Bourbon! If I wanted a \$30 bottle of retail wine, it was going to be either bottom-of-the-barrel European (bottles I knew would cost less than 5€ over there) or Australian. I left the wine store that day with bottles of Heathcote Nebbiolo, Adelaide Hills Pinot Meunier, and Strathbogie Ranges Riesling. I spent less than \$100 on the three, but I was nervous about what I'd find in the bottles, and apprehensive of my wine-drinking future in Australia.

To my great surprise and satisfaction, all three were superb. The Nebbiolo was fragrant and lifted, graced by just enough VA, with the roundness of juicy red fruit upfront balanced by a drying finish. The Pinot Meunier was slightly hazy, garneted, and transparent, with a supple and velvety texture. And the Riesling deviated from the Australian norm of stinging acid and zero sugar, with about 10 grams per liter RS and singing aromatics.

The first weekend we got the chance, Jon and I rented a car and drove out of Melbourne. The options seemed endless: Yarra Valley, Beechworth, King Valley, Macedon Ranges, Geelong, Rutherglen, Mornington Peninsula, and Goulburn Valley were all within our range. It was Easter weekend, celebrated like Americans celebrate Labor Day as the last weekend of the summer. There was a big festival in [Beechworth](#), so we decided to drive there. This was Jon's first time driving on the left side of the road, and after several near-scrapes of the car and harrowing freeway onramps, we were on our way.

We had fallen into normal road-trip activities when Jon suddenly squealed with delight at a freeway sign: *It's Nagambie Lakes!* I lit up, too. Nagambie Lakes was one of those things I had studied but never thought I'd see. We scurried across three lanes to make the exit, and as we drove into [Tahbilk Winery](#), we felt a weight of historical significance. The cellar door, as Australians call the tasting room, was like an old Gold Rush saloon. We learned that Tahbilk is the largest landowner of Marsanne vines in the world (they have more Marsanne than is planted in all of Hermitage), tasted the wines, and ate lunch overlooking one of the lakes.

Back at work, my sommeliers were nonplussed by my weekend adventures. One of them, who tends toward the more "natural" styles of wine, could not believe I'd had lunch at Tahbilk and enjoyed sparkling Shiraz. We bantered playfully about how I gravitate toward "industrial wine," and I countered with the fact that he enjoys the stench of bacterial overgrowth. But, when it came down to it, I think what he couldn't believe was that I was taking so much pleasure in what he considered the simple and pedestrian wines of his home country. They were exotic and new to me, but to him they were old hat. I thought about the wines of my previous backyard, and how much better my new Australian backyard was.



The weekend after Jon and I got back from Beechworth, we had dinner plans with some newfound friends. We decided to do BYO Szechuan last minute and ducked into a dodgy bottle shop to grab a few wines. We ended up with (relatively cheap) Tasmanian Pinot Gris, McLaren Vale Grenache, and sparkling Shiraz—worth a shot, we thought. The Grenache ended up being a home run with the bold and spicy food. At 14.5% alcohol, it stood up to the flavors, with a kiss of residual sugar that licked some of the heat off the palate. I started to go on about how impressed we were with the wines of Australia and how American wines right now weren't nearly as exciting.

Jon interjected. "There's a lot of really great American wine."

"Yeah," I continued, perhaps a little too much wine under my belt, "but not like what we've had here. I mean, the diversity, the character, the value. It's so much better here!"

Jon gave me a look that said he wasn't done with this conversation but dropped it in the face of our new acquaintances. On the way home, he picked it up again. Hard. "I don't know why you're hating on American wine so much."

"I don't know why you're defending it so much," I replied. "It's not like we ever drank a lot of American wine. And we've been excited to drink Australian wine here."

"Yeah, that's only because we can't afford Europe over here."

"That's not true."

“Maybe you never gave American wine a chance!” Jon yelled, storming up to our apartment. I had no idea why we were fighting over something so stupid. We went to bed, backs turned to one another, no more words spoken.

The next day, Jon apologized. I did, too. It struck me that Jon missed America. Perhaps not the wines, but our friends, colleagues, and family that we’d left behind. My blind dismissal of American wine hit a nostalgic chord, and he lashed out. But I also realized he was right. I never really gave American wine a chance.

I was born in Napa and grew up in Marin. My first memories of wine were sniffs of my parents’ \$7.99 California Chardonnay, which to me smelled of nail polish remover, marshmallow, and canned pineapple. I didn’t start drinking wine until I studied abroad in Rome during college. The trattoria wines were crisp, taut, and structured. They smelled like fresh fruit, balsamic vinegar, and concrete, miles away from the sense memory wine left in my youth. As I started working in wine, my great love became Germany’s long and sinewy dry Riesling. I went through a Chablis phase. I developed a love for Red Burgundy. I had a soft spot for the coconut-tinged reds of Rioja. But American wine was never anything but that cheap Chardonnay in my mom’s wine glass. I studied and tasted the wines for exams, but I never looked at them through a lens of excitement and curiosity. It took moving to Australia, and seeing someone else’s backyard through that lens, to show me I’d never afforded America the same chance.

The Biggest Pitfalls of Australian Wine

Though there are plenty of Australian wines with extreme alcohol and a shellac of oak, these are not my main complaints. These wines, though I may not enjoy drinking them, offer pleasure to many. My four main concerns derive from wines claiming to work in the name of balance, authenticity, and “Old World” style.

Underripe Picking

The US went through its IPOB phase, which resulted in a lot of fantastic wines as well as a lot of green, thin, unpleasurable wines. Australia seems to be enjoying a similar renaissance. Many are doing this with a deft hand, and delivering nervy, tense, and appropriately fruited wines. Others, however, are not so balanced.

Overuse of Stems

I have always loved a healthy degree of stem-inclusion in my Pinot Noir, especially when it’s from Burgundy. Stems *can* add a degree of complexity and structure without adding a gratuitously green note (think L’Arlet, Dujac, and DRC). A few Australians have mastered this concept (Joe Holyman’s Project X

in Tasmania is the best example I've tried). The vast majority, though, are using high amounts of unripe stems, creating a strong stewed green bean and asparagus note that crowds out any pleasant fruit and other secondary aromas.

Underuse of Sulfur

This seems to be an epidemic worldwide. There are some regions that make *sans soufre* wines and still maintain a sense of grape varietal and place: Beaujolais, the Northern Rhône, and Loire Chenin come to mind. Most other places in the world, wines made without a little judicious sulfur taste like nothing but bacterial spoilage. In the name of authenticity and non-intervention, these wines often taste *less* of what they are. A few producers in Australia are using minimal sulfur with positive results (Jauma, Simha, Latta, William Downie), but even these are for a select audience.

Fear of Sweetness

Traditional Riesling in Australia is *dry*. Rip the veneer off your teeth, pucker your cheeks, make your eyes water dry. With total acids pushing 10 grams per liter and beyond, and residual sugars often clocking in below 2 grams per liter, these wines are punishing. Most consumers think they want dry wine—that's what they ask for—but is it truly what they like? At Attica, I pour 2008 Egon Müller Braune Kupp Kabinett as my first pairing. I worried that the Australian market would find it too sweet, but guests go crazy over it. People don't think they like sugar, but they do.

The Most Exciting Things in Australia Right Now

Italian Varietals

Palmina championed Italian varietals in Santa Barbara, but the trend has never become widespread in the US. There are numerous Australian wineries dedicated to Italian grape varietals, and even more who make one or two on the side. Pizzini in King Valley was one of the modern pioneers of these grapes in Australia, making precise and correct representations of everything from Brachetto to Verduzzo, Canaiolo to Barbara, and certainly Nebbiolo and Sangiovese. Castagna in Beechworth is another producer worth noting, with an epic, brooding Sangiovese from Brunello clones called La Chiave. Vinea Marson in Heathcote is making "Prosecco" from Glera and a white blend called Grazia from Pinot Bianco, Friulano, Picolit, and Malvasia that has all the oiliness and bitterness of a Friulian blend. Unico Zelo makes three Fianos, from Riverland, Clare Valley, and Adelaide Hills, each with a different (and varietally correct) expression of the grape. [Luke Lambert](#), [Giaconda](#), and [Jasper Hill](#) are all on the Nebbiolo train, cementing the legitimacy of the grape in Australia. These wines maintain the freshness and structure (and even VA) that Italy is known for, while adding a little bit of juicy, New-World fruit to the mix.

Pinot Meunier

Only Australians are making still Pinot Meunier with any sort of commercial viability. Best's in Great Western is most notable, with Old Vine Meunier, a young vine cuvée, and a blend of Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier that ages well passed its 20th birthday. Mac Forbes in the Yarra and Murdoch Hill in Adelaide Hills also make fun, juicy, light versions with nominal price tags.

Riesling

Though Australian Riesling has its pitfalls (see above), many producers are beginning to accept the balance a little sugar can provide. Grosset has, in recent years, released its Alea Riesling, with about 10 grams per liter of residual sugar. It still tastes dry; it just has a bit more softness to it and is accessible much younger than their powerhouse dry bottlings. Mac Forbes' RS10 has peeled back the veil on the relationship between sugar and acidity for Australians. People are starting to come around to the idea that Riesling doesn't have to be absent of residual sugar to be dry. And often, like a proper dosage in Champagne, a little bit of RS helps these wines find balance and expressiveness of aromatics. To me, the only Rieslings that can get away with almost zero residual sugar are the ones with a lot of dry extract, power, and ripeness of fruit (and only then after 10 or more years of bottle age). Find a bottle of 20-year-old Grosset Polish Hill or [Jim Barry](#) Florita, and you'll understand.

Local Spirits

In 2014, Tasmania's Sullivans Cove took the world by storm when it was awarded the World's Best Whisky Award in the World Wine Awards. It was the first time this honor was bestowed on a distillery outside of Scotland or Japan. Since then, the craft spirit movement in Australia has received more attention, and people have realized what a diverse and high-quality spectrum of spirits the country offers. Belgrove, also in Tasmania, is one of the few farm-to-bottle distilleries in the world, growing, fermenting, and distilling its entire output, including killer rye whiskey and, surprisingly, Pommeau. Loch, Applewood, and Four Pillars—among countless others—make exceptionally high quality gin, many using native botanicals like lemon myrtle and mountain pepper to flavor. MAiDENii, just outside Melbourne, is making exciting vermouth and amaro. I have a long list of other things I want to try, with plans to convert most of my cocktail and spirit list over to Australian producers.

Championing Our Own Backyards

My goal at Attica is to create one of the greatest Victorian wine lists in the world, featuring both the stalwart producers of the region and young up-and-comers. I believe this provides the best service to my guests and to the region in which we live—in both environmental and financial impact. And if we can't support and foster the growth of wines in our own home turf, who will? It took moving across the world

for me to understand this. There will always be European wines on the list at Attica, but they will be a select few to provide Old World counterpoints for the styles of Australia: to prove that the wines of Australia deserve to be spoken of in the same breath.



21 comments 0 members are here



Guillaume Barry *over 2 years ago*

Hello Jane,

Thank you for the dialectic approach, very inspiring!

While I share your critical approach - big up to the prominent greeniness at the entry level; which coming from Europe made me initially and still going almost exclusively for homeland wines, I most definitely share a growing excitement about varietals and spirits nicely executed around here, and how nicely!

I am happy that I know a good proportion of the winemakers and distillery that you bring up to support this vision, and equally glad that I don't know the rest, for I am most definitely sure it will make up for good tastings!



Jhea Fulgaro *over 3 years ago*

I Feel the same passion for these great and unsung Aussie wines. I think a lot of US sommeliers just don't get to try them or have preconceived notions of them and don't try them. Which is a shame. There are so many parallels between our two countries on great wine... and of course on not so great wine, but you have to get out there and drink it. I promise there's magic in those bottles.



Wendy Shoemaker *over 3 years ago*

Great writing! Thanks for sharing! You and Jon have a great time!!



Matthieu Ghezouli *over 3 years ago*

Thanks for this really interesting article and way of life. Hope to read more soon!



Eric D. Major *over 3 years ago*

You are quite the writer. Lots of great knowledge and perspective here. Kudos and best of luck!

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