

# WINE OVERVIEW



## AUSTRALIA

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Closely review the syllabus for this wine level to determine just what items require your attention in each of the region/country overview documents.

Australia has become known to the average consumer for one thing; big, burly, high alcohol and overripe Shiraz. While there are certainly examples of this style being made there, Australia as a group of wine regions has much, much more to offer. Australia is a huge country, and saying that all Australian wine is the same is akin to saying that all American wine is the same. From Margaret River in the west, through the Barossa Valley over to the Hunter Valley in New South Wales, one will find distinct growing regions producing a wide range of varietals and styles.

Considering its “new world” status, there is a long history of viticulture in Australia. The first plantings date to the late eighteenth century, with commercially successful vineyards recorded as early as the 1820’s. By the 1850’s, most regions of the country had some vineyard presence. Plantings spread successfully until around 1875, when the phylloxera louse that had already decimated the vineyards of Europe reached the shores of Australia and its vulnerable European rootstocks. It was only through severe restrictions on the movement of vines and other material between the various regions that some areas were saved. Thanks to this caution, regions such as the Barossa valley survived and thrived, and now are home to many of the oldest producing vines on earth. While the government-sponsored vine pull of 1987 resulted in the irreplaceable loss of many century-old Shiraz vineyards, a great many others are still in production.

### AUSTRALIAN WINE LAW

Australia, like many new world regions, has relatively simple regulations for wine and wine labeling. The regional designations here are called Geographic Indications, or GIs. These may be large, such as Western Australia, or quite small, such as Eden Valley, inside the Barossa. There are no rated vineyard system, no Cru structure, nor are there other designations of quality inherent existing in the system. The regulations do require the 95% of the wine claiming a GI come from that GI, and that a label claiming multiple GIs includes at least 5% of each GI listed. The requirements for single varietal labeling are 85%, throughout all of Australia.

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# MAJOR VARIETALS OF AUSTRALIA

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## RED GRAPES

**Shiraz** – Synonymous with Syrah. Deep, dark, rich and powerful, this grape has become the country's most popular varietal internationally. Runs the gamut from big, brooding and dense, to rustic, structured and elegant.

**Grenache** – Less noted and lighter of weight than Shiraz, but a very important blending grape, especially in SE Australia. Lighter in color than some other noble reds, but one of the most complex varietals on the planet.

**Mourvedre** – A classic blending grape over most of France, and sometimes called Mataro in Australia. Darker of color and of fruit than Grenache, it lends density to the ubiquitous "GSM" blends found all over the country.

**Cabernet Sauvignon** – An unusually undervalued grape here. It can be full-bodied, intense, long-lived and powerful, but frequently finds a more elegant and subtle expression, especially in benchmark areas such as Coonawarra.

**Pinot Noir** – Beginning to emerge, and can be one of the most surprising grapes in Australia. Found around the cooler, coastal Southern regions near Melbourne, such as Mornington Peninsula, Strathbogie Ranges, or Yarra.

## WHITE GRAPES

**Chardonnay** – Ubiquitous around the world, Chardonnay can be found all over Australia, for good or for bad. The best areas span the country, and areas such as Orange in New South Wales and Margaret River in Western Australia can both produce high quality wines.

**Semillon** – Possibly the most underrated grape in Australia, and when shown at its best in the Hunter Valley, can be one of the most underrated wines in the world. Spelled with two 'l's and only one 'i' in Australia.

**Muscat** – A key grape for the production of sweet, sticky dessert wines. Focused in New South Wales, especially Rutherglen.

## REGIONS OF AUSTRALIA

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### SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The state of South Australia produces a higher volume of wine than any other region in Australia. This, along the multistate GI of Southeast Australia (encompassing South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales), is the source of most of the mid-to-high priced wines found on store shelves here in America.

### BAROSSA VALLEY

The Barossa Valley, sitting just north of the city of Adelaide, was settled 200 years ago and still maintains its Prussian and German heritage. It is perhaps the best known, and most popular, wine region in Australia. It is home to some of the country's most famous producers. A high percentage of the highly-rated wines that drove the Australian Wine bubble claimed the Barossa as home. For many years, the Barossa produced largely sweet and dessert wines, and it wasn't until the 1980's that it began to become respected for its table wine production. The late 1990's, and especially the legendary 1998 vintage, finally put the Barossa on the worldwide stage as a world-class producer of fine wine.

This is unquestionably Shiraz country, and the hot, low valley floor, largely brown dirt spotted with heavily irrigated green vineyards, can indeed produce the highly ripe, jammy qualities for which Shiraz has so recently developed a reputation. There are also vineyards planted in the transverse valleys and foothills of the Barossa Ranges that experience cooler temperatures, and sometimes more rainfall. The sub-region of Eden Valley, sitting on the eastern side of the Barossa, sits above the valley floor and produces extraordinarily pretty and elegant Shiraz, as well as some of the best Riesling in Australia.



## McLAREN VALE

McLaren Vale can be thought of as Sonoma, to Barossa's Napa. Less well known, perhaps less well respected in the eye of the general public, but producing beautiful, soft, supple wines with plenty of structure and power. The climate and landscape fit this comparison; the rolling green hills of McLaren Vale enjoy much more coastal influence than does Barossa, sitting as it does next to the Gulf St. Vincent, southeast of Adelaide.

There have recently been efforts to recognize some sub-regions in McLaren Vale, as the distinct microclimates created by the elevation and exposure difference are well recognized by those producing wine in the valley. Areas such as Seaview, Clarendon, and Blewitt Springs appear to have identities and expressions of their own. Though not here yet, soon may come the time when those distinct names can appear on the labels of the wines they produce.

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## CLARE VALLEY

North of the Barossa lies the Clare Valley. This area produces underrated Shiraz, soft and dark, but is best known as being the spiritual home of Australian Riesling. Clare turns out some of the best Riesling that Australia has to offer, especially from the Polish Hill sub-region.

## COONAWARRA

Coonawarra is one of the few areas in Australia known predominantly for its Cabernet Sauvignon. It is famous for its "Terra Rossa" soils, which allow the production of the elegant, structured, focused Cabernet which is one of the most distinctive wines in the world.

## OTHER REGIONS

A high percentage of the less expensive wines coming from this part of Australia are produced using fruit from lesser known GIs such as Langhorne Creek, Riverland and the Fleurieu Peninsula.

## WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Although the state of Western Australia is the largest state in the country, the wine production is quite small, although of very high average quality. Most of the production is centered around the Southwestern tip, south of Perth.

The best known region in Western Australia is Margaret River, which occupies a favorable spot between the hills of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge and the Indian Ocean. This dry, moderate climate encourages long hang time and balanced flavors. Here thrive cooler-climate grapes, and the white wines from Margaret River are some of the best in Australia. Shiraz is rare here, although some elegant, red-fruit driven Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon are made in modest quantities.

## VICTORIA

Victoria, which is the small state directly to the east of South Australia, is a great example of the diversity of Australia. It is home to some very exciting new regions, producing atypical Australian wines such as Pinot Noir, as well as very high quality Chardonnay. You can also find some of the most elegant and structured Shiraz, and unctuously sweet, world class dessert wines.

The various sub-regions of Victoria fan out from the fantastic city of Melbourne, and the international, modern feel of the city seems to imbue the area's winemakers with a sense of experimentation. It is the most exciting area in Australia for variety and high quality.

## HEATHCOTE

Heathcote is Shiraz, but not the Shiraz one would typically expect. It enjoys some modest elevation, and a very moderate climate. The soils here are varied; grey loam is common, but the prized plots are planted in ancient Cambrian soils, weathered from 100 million years of exposure. These soils allow for deep vine penetration and very high water retention. Many of the vineyards here are dry-farmed, and the results of these factors are wines of great structure, red to red-black fruit profiles, and great longevity. The Shiraz grown here can be some of the most distinctive in the world.

## MORNINGTON / STRATHBOGIE / YARRA

Mornington Peninsula and the Strathbogrie Ranges (and, to a lesser extent, Yarra), have effectively burst on to the wine scene only in the last few years. These areas are creating excitement for Chardonnay, and especially for Pinot Noir, in a county where no excitement had previously existed. Although not particularly alike in situation, they all enjoy a continental climate, with long hang times and the ability to generate racy acidity.

## RUTHERGLEN

Rutherglen, first planted almost 200 years ago, has become famous for amazingly high quality dessert wine. The Muscat and Tokay (Muscadelle) are absolutely world class, and can be among the most sought-after wines in the country.



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## **NEW SOUTH WALES**

New South Wales, the mid-Eastern state that contains Sydney and Brisbane, is better known for wine consumption than for wine production. It is a willing supplier of low-end fruit for mass production, and many bulk brands source cheap juice from areas such as Big Rivers. The GI of Orange, however, has long been recognized for solidly produced Chardonnay, and the fans of Hunter Valley are few but persistent. They insist that one of the iconic grape/region combinations in the world resides here, and those that have experienced Hunter Valley Semillon frequently agree. The Hunter is decidedly hot, with cooling maritime influences serving to give the wines a good dose of acidity. The effect on the Semillon is such that it develops amazing richness and weight, but preserves the brightness and liveliness that can be easily lost in other climates. The best wines typically come from the Lower Hunter Valley, not the upper Hunter, which is flatter and lacks the maritime breezes that balance the valley below.

## **TASMANIA**

Of recent note is the island of Tasmania, which is producing some quality cool climate white wines, and is showing signs of becoming an important source for the production of sparkling wines.