



THE NEW AUSTRALIAN BREED

STATESIDE GATEKEEPERS TAKE ANOTHER LOOK

BY KRISTEN BIELER

Australian wines are coming back—but not exactly. The Australian wine category is a different animal than it was a decade ago (when “critic labels” roamed the shelves). What we’re witnessing isn’t a return of what was, but rather the reinvention of a category, and a new breed of wines.

Christy Frank has seen the transformation firsthand. When she opened Frankly Wines in 2008, she featured 30 Australian wines. Within one year, the category had virtually disintegrated and all but three of her wines had left the U.S. market. “The

interest wasn’t here, and many producers figured they would just sell domestically where there was demand,” she explains.

Within the last two years—the last 12 months in particular—Frank has seen a massive rejuvenation for Australia and her section is back up to 30 wines,

almost a quarter of her offerings. The overwhelming majority of these wines are new to the market: “Some of our most exciting wines are just entering the U.S. for the first time; small production, niche producers who showcase regionality and terroir. These wines just weren’t here ten years ago when the category was flying high. The category has reset itself at a higher price point, too. It used to be all about the under-\$10 segment or the over-\$75 cult wines. Now the sweet spot is in the \$20 to \$30 range.”

Much credit goes to a handful of devoted importers. Australian native



LEFT: Eldredge Vineyards in Clare Valley

“We tasted with young winemakers in Yarra Valley crafting balanced, low-alcohol, high-acid wines these are New World wines with an Old World sensibility.”

Jeff Taylor, 11 Madison Park

Grange for \$1,000 and expect to sell Australian wine. Sommeliers are finally taking another look at Australia.”

SOMM LOVE

“It’s always about the gatekeepers. Whenever we can get in front of consumers we will sell,” says Ronnie Sanders, president of Australian specialist Vine Street Imports. Luckily these days, what excites the gate keepers is what Australia offers: Native yeasts, biodynamic viticulture, natural winemaking and smaller emerging regions like King Valley, Strathbogie Ranges and Tasmania. Cool-climate regions like Victoria’s Pyrenees have lured high-profile outsiders, too, like Rhône master Michel Chapoutier, who crafts restrained, very Rhône-like Syrah under three labels, including Domaine Terlato & Chapoutier. “The demand is absolutely for lean, cool-climate wines that are distinct,” says Sanders. “Sommeliers who love Jura and Grüner Veltliner are now turning back to Australia because there is so much refined wine being made.”

Sanders sees an interesting parallel between what’s happening in California with brands like Forlorn Hope and Rajat Parr’s Sandi Wines project—a return to truly balanced wines with lower alcohol—and Australia’s winemaking

culture. “I have done this for 20 years, and this is by far the most interesting time in Australian wine by a long shot. Our customers today are the best restaurants in the world.” Vine Street’s Australian sales were up 20% last year with the \$24 to \$29 the fastest-growing range (“There was a long period where we couldn’t sell anything over \$20,” he recalls).

New York’s renowned 11 Madison Park didn’t have a single Southern Hemisphere wine on the list until head sommelier Jeff Taylor had an “aha” moment in Australia’s Yarra Valley two years ago. “We tasted with young winemakers crafting balanced, low-alcohol, high-acid wines—these are New World wines with an Old World sensibility and they work well with chef Daniel Humm’s cuisine,” he says. Taylor now lists about 18 Aussie wines, including one by the glass. “I have so much fun presenting these wines because most people don’t come here expecting to drink Australian. From a cost perspective, these wines outperform California.”

Nicole Kosta was fairly shocked when she took the reins as beverage director at San Francisco’s Mandarin Oriental six years ago and found a combined “Australia/New Zealand” section on the list, with a meager four wines. “There is such a huge market for these wines, if the trade will give them a chance,” she says. “Our Australian tastings and events get the biggest draw of anything we do.” Her Australian section today, 30 wines

CHRISTY FRANK



Gordon Little was frustrated by what he saw while working in the U.S. wine business: “People who really knew wine knew nothing about Australia. And the wines that Australians drink weren’t available here.” Little set out to change that with his Little Peacock Imports. “We champion things we know the market will be interested in, such as lesser-known varietals, wild yeasts and old vines—all the things sommeliers love. This is the direction the Australian wine industry is headed,” he says.

Little challenges restaurants with two dozen Brunellos and little or no Australia to improve their Aussie sections, and sales will follow: “I tell them you can’t list Henschke at \$500 and Penfold’s

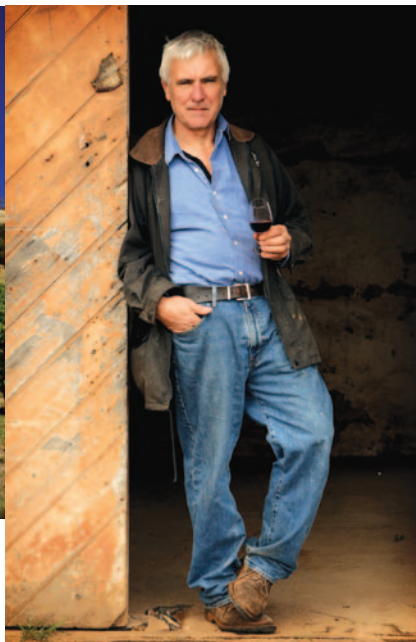


JEFF TAYLOR



Rob Dolan Vineyards

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Christy Frank, Frankly Wines

strong, is overwhelmingly populated by boutique wines that are new to the market. “I love older vintages, Pinot Noir and other up-and-coming things, and there is a broader selection than ever to choose from now,” she says. “I feature a Wirra Wirra Church Block 2009 by the glass—it’s my dad’s go-to wine back in Australia, but no one here has heard of it!”

FINALLY, A CLEAN SLATE

Thanks to short memories and a new generation of wine drinkers, Australia’s negative image no longer plagues the category, Frank believes: “People no longer define Australia by the big, jammy, point-driven wines that gave the category a bad name.



NICOLE KOSTA

PHILIP SHAW

Enough time has passed and enough new people have joined the industry in the last decade, so there really is a clean slate.” Kosta agrees: “The perception of Australian wines as extracted and high-alcohol seems to have left the market. People just don’t talk about it any more.”

Younger companies like six-year old New York wholesaler Vision Brands didn’t even experience the downturn. “We never saw the dip; it’s been growth all the way for our Australian portfolio,” reports partner Ricardo Castiblanco. His biggest challenge is running out of wine. “Many of our wineries have a cult following, and we are getting only a handful of cases. When you have sommeliers like Jordan Salcito, Michael Madrigal and Pascaline Lepeltier putting these wines on their lists and Instagramming about it, word spreads fast.”

GIVING THE MARKET ANOTHER GO

Word has spread in Australia, too, and a growing



BEN CHAPMAN

number of producers are seeking U.S. distribution. Philip Shaw, former head winemaker for Rosemount and Southcorp, had soured on the U.S. market when the Australian category bottomed out, but now plans to give it another shot with his own line of eponymous wines from the cool-climate Orange region. He believes the U.S. wine market is finally ready for wines like this.

Ben Chapman, sales and marketing manager for Thorn-Clark Wines, has seen this same shift in style preference. “Our flagship William Randell Cabernet from Eden Valley is a good example of a balanced wine that is receiving an excellent response from the trade. I’m not sure we would have had such a good response to a restrained Australian Cabernet if we had introduced the wine to the U.S. market six to eight years ago.”

Thorn-Clark weathered the storm, remaining in the market throughout the Aussie slump, and reports renewed interest from the trade. “People are increasingly realizing that Australia is a very large country with plenty of regional difference in terms of styles, and they are coming back to see what else we have.” ■