

Deeper Down Under

A new crop of Australian wine importers

by Stephanie Johnson

Henry Hudson and Tom Donegan met in a most American way: through Twitter. Each had recently moved to California, Hudson from Sydney after a career in manufacturing, and Donegan after working as a sommelier in some of Melbourne's leading restaurants. Over beers one night, they lamented the state of Aussie wines in the US: "I was shocked at the skewed understanding of Australian wines in this country," says Donegan. "How was it possible that such a vast and diverse wine-producing country was being totally written off?"

They weren't the only ones: While they went off to start Hudson Wine Brokers, a firm in Los Angeles specializing in the sort of Aussie wines they preferred to drink, Little Peacock in New York and Red Earth Wines in Seattle were also setting up shop.

All three firms were born out of frustration with an American perception of Australian wines as heavy, jammy and high in alcohol. That's not what Aussies drink, according to Gordon Little, founder of Little Peacock: "A lot of the wines that did well here [in the US] were made for export," chasing scores from US critics. Martin Gorman, founder of Red Earth Wines, puts it more bluntly: "Most of the wines here I wouldn't touch back home."

By the late 1990s, the market for Australian wine had virtually split between two extremes: bold, fruit-forward Aussie reds at the luxury end of the market, and industrial-scale affordably priced bottles—the "critter" wines, so named for the animals that adorned their labels.

Both categories did well in the US into the early 2000s. When the financial crisis hit in 2008, demand for luxury wines fell dramatically, while a rising Aussie dollar made Australia's entry-level wines less competitive.

As Australian wines in the bombastic mode fell out of style, a number of importers who had ridden the big Aussie wave left the market. Others were sustained by the classics in their portfolios: Importers such as Old Bridge Cellars, Vine Street Imports and Wine Trees Portfolio have pulled through by focusing on regional wines.

While sales are showing signs of life, Australia's wine exports to the US are still only a quarter of what they were in 2007, according to figures from Wine Australia. It may not seem like an attractive

market for new importers, and Hudson admits: "No one was screaming for Australian wine when we started this."

And yet, we spoke to a number of retailers and sommeliers, including Tim Farrell at the Brooklyn Wine Exchange and Jesse Webster at *Public* in NYC, who are beginning to stock new Australian wines. Here's a look at three of the newest players on the scene.

Hudson Wine Brokers, Los Angeles

Henry Hudson and Tom Donegan knew just the type of producers they wanted to bring to the US market: small, independent and sustainably farmed, with wines that express regional character. With consulting help from Rob Geddes, MW, in

"No one was screaming for Australian wine when we started this." — Henry Hudson

Australia, they looked for producers whose wines fell into two broad categories: icons and young guns.

Hudson included established "icons" to show respect for Australian producers who have always made balanced wines of terroir, like Clare Valley's Grosset, famous for mineral-driven rieslings, and Balnaves of Coonawarra. He also signed "young guns" like Michael Aylward of Mornington Peninsula's Ocean Eight, who makes racy chardonnay and pinot noir, and former NYC sommelier Brad Hickey of McLaren Vale's Brash Higgins, who has been pushing boundaries with amphora-aged wines, as well as winning



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recognition for his 2012 McLaren Vale Shiraz (see page 73).

Hudson and Donegan started selling wines in September 2014 with a strategy of reaching influential sommeliers in key markets like San Francisco, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and New York, hoping their approval would trickle down to other buyers.

Little Peacock, NY

Melbourne native Gordon Little worked for the Australian Trade Commission and at an international logistics firm before moving to New York in 2009 for a master's program in international relations at New York University. A six-month stint managing Le Vigne wine shop in the West Village brought him into contact with people who knew a lot about wine, but almost nothing about Australia's offerings. Many of the producers he enjoyed back home were simply not available. He wondered: "Where are the cool-climate wines?"

Little decided to start importing the kind of wines that "Aussies kept for themselves." He and his wife, Lauren Peacock, a practicing attorney, formed Little Peacock in early 2012 and began selling wines in the second half of that year. He now represents 18 wineries from nine regions, including some from warm Barossa but many from cooler climates like Mornington Peninsula, Frankland River and Adelaide Hills.

Although he initially worried that some

"It was trendy to hate Australia for about five years, but now people see that we're good at expressing different regions and are still a great value."

—Bruce Cunningham, Wine Trees Portfolio

of his choices might be too esoteric for the US market, wines like the Ashbrook Estate Verdelho from Margaret River (p. 70) have become popular at places such as *Annisa* and Vintry Fine Wines in NYC.

Red Earth Wines, Seattle

Martin Gorman spent 30 years as a management consultant in Australia before moving to Seattle with his American wife in 2012. Disappointed with the selection of Australian wines in restaurants and retail stores, he spent six months visiting Australian wineries and launched Red Earth Wines in 2012.

Gorman sought wines that showcased Australia's regional diversity. "Australia is a big place, with nearly 3,000 wineries in 76 regions," he says. "People over here just had no clue about that." Most of the wines he imports have never been in the US market.

Gorman represents two of the most highly

rated Australian reds in this issue. Juniper Estate's 2010 Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon has been esteemed in Aussie circles for years, but only recently made its way to the States. *W&S* editor Greene called it "the best cabernet you've never heard of" and awarded it 96 points (p. 70). Tschark's 2012 Barossa Valley Marananga Grenache from the Gnadensfrei vineyard also impressed our panels, especially at \$32.

At the moment, Red Earth currently distributes only in Washington State, a tough environment for Aussie wines given the preference for locally grown reds, but Gorman remains positive about plans to expand beyond the northwest: "We're in a market that might be more hostile to Australian wines than any other, and we're still making progress." ■

For reviews of many of these and other Australian wines, turn to page 68.