

SUBSCRIBE

ABOUT PUNCH



ARTICLES

COLUMNS

CITY GUIDES

RECIPES

PUNCH A-Z

NEWS



Australian Wine's Return to Cool

After a swift rise and plateau, Australia is emerging as a hotbed for wine's avant-garde. In Jon Bonné's journey through the New Australia, he visits the region that's become its focal point: the Adelaide Hills.

NOVEMBER 9, 2016 | *story:* **JON BONNÉ** / *illustration:* **ESSI KIMPIMÄKI**



Share story: 

[Tweet](#)

[Email](#)

here do we go?

W *Where do we go now?*

Guns 'n' Roses, "Sweet Child o' Mine" (1987)

The specter of Guns 'n' Roses seems to be everywhere I go in Australia, especially around Adelaide. The band is coming to play in the South Australian capital, and the local radio stations aren't going to rest until every man, woman and child in the state knows it.

In fact, the 1980s overall seem to have been well-preserved down here. The radio is filled with Aerosmith and Frankie Goes to Hollywood and John Cougar Mellencamp, from back when he was known as John Cougar.

It's a decade that Australians might understandably cherish. The 1980s marked an awakening of the rest of the world to Australian culture. With apologies to Olivia Newton-John, I'd mark its beginning as 1982, when Mel Gibson showed up in *The Road Warrior* and Men at Work's "Down Under" blanketed AM radio. Later there would be INXS and Midnight Oil, and, less auspiciously, *Crocodile Dundee* and Outback Steakhouse. That thrall of the '80s also ushered in a craving for Australian wine, which became a common sight on U.S. shelves by the early 1990s—labels like Rosemount, Penfolds and Lindeman's providing enjoyable and cheap alternatives to California fare.

Like other children of the '80s, I was swept up in a love affair with Australia. I spent hours poring over National Geographic photos of the Outback and became obsessed with Midnight Oil—not just their breakthrough "Beds are Burning" but the entire catalog, going back to the apocalyptic "Red Sails in the Sunset" and even their debut as a surf-punk band in 1978. And having initially grown up on French and California wine, I, too, swooned over the Australian examples; in the mid-1990s, my kitchen rack was filled with bottles of Tyrrell's Long Flat Red.

That love affair was never consummated, which is to say I never managed to get on a plane and go. But jump forward a couple decades, and here I am, Simple Minds at an age-inappropriate volume on the radio, winding my way up the M1 out of downtown Adelaide into the Adelaide Hills to the east.

Tell me your troubles and doubts

Giving me everything inside and out

Simple Minds, "Don't You (Forget About Me)" (1985)

The Adelaide Hills has been around as a wine region for nearly two decades, but in the past couple of years it has become a focal point for the New Australia—specifically the small town of Basket Range, which, despite a population of 374, hosts a disproportionate number of Australia’s most daring and lauded winemakers. This crew leans to the naturalist end of the spectrum, and an impressive roster of people interested in wine’s cutting edge has been making the trek to visit them. (Neither of which has endeared them to the Hills’ more conservative cohort.)

Their wines hit all the right buttons nowadays: made in tiny quantities, using methods—pét-nat, skin fermentation for whites—currently fashionable elsewhere. That also makes them the opposite of how we think about Australia; they’re antithetical to the country’s safe and industrial traditions of winemaking, which hinged on technically correct styles of wine, enforced by wine shows full of judges who rewarded that correctness over individuality. This contrast, actually, is what has made their work so fascinating and earned them so much attention, from Australians and outlanders alike.

There’s something more, though. I think the New Australia is having a moment now because so many things beloved in the ‘80s are enjoying a rekindled love affair: synth rock, *Stranger Things*, shoulder pads, the new *MTV News*. My theory is that Australia is again rising as a source of cool in American eyes. In fact, it’s already begun. Look no further than *Mad Max: Fury Road*—George Miller repeating history with Charlize Theron instead of Gibson. The fierce, bald-headed War Boys looked awfully familiar to anyone who’d idolized *Midnight Oil*’s Peter Garrett—or anyone who wanders today through Sydney’s Chippendale neighborhood.

The return of Australian wine also shares its context with a place that Americans can appreciate: California. I needed to come see the New Australia precisely because I’d spent so much time discovering the New California. The two places have always had a kinship—two bookends of the Pacific, sharing an aesthetic defined by sea and sun. In terms of wine culture, the radical changes that have taken place are essentially mirror images, too. In both places, freshness and nuance have taken over from sweetness and impact. And if anything, Australia had a bigger boomerang to achieve: The Big Flavor era that California endured was even more pronounced in the overwhelming Australian wines of the late 1990s and early 2000s—shiraz and grenache alcoholic enough to be marketed as port. For a short while, those wines were at the pinnacle of the wine world.

But as *Midnight Oil* sang, *Your dreamworld will fall*. While California sustained a certain popularity even during its most bombastic years, Australian wine fell off a cliff. Fans of those eat-with-a-spoon shirazes grew weary and no longer needed any more in their cellars. (This might be

why, when I ask everyone where they're being sold today, the answer is almost uniformly, "China.")

But that was only half of it. Australia also faltered because it bet the rest of its wine industry on cheap wines with whimsical labels—which is mostly to say, Yellow Tail. Initially that gave rise to an enormous boom in Australian wine, but when the boom ended, it ended hard; in 2015, after more than doubling, the dollar value of Australian wine exports to the U.S. had sunk to exactly where it had been 15 years earlier. The image cultivated over 25 years—cheerful, brash, shrimp-on-the-barbie—crashed and burned.

It's clear that the New Australia is very deliberately being built out of the ashes of these past failures. And I think it's not coincidental that a lot of the emerging generation of New Australian winemakers and restaurateurs are my contemporaries, which is to say we remember when Australia was a place where cool was born.

It's important that the current revival is, like the New California, taking place in nearly every wine region of Australia. But the Adelaide Hills is a perfect focal point, perhaps because, unlike the Barossa Valley just to the northwest or McLaren Vale to the southeast, with their deep histories of winemaking, the region's relative youth has engendered a sort of fearlessness. "There's no rules," says Charlotte Hardy, who makes her Charlotte Dalton wines there.

The area reminds me of far western Sonoma County, another place that engenders fearlessness. Some of it is the geography, full of undulating hills, damp ravines and skinny pines, and some is a climate that's generally colder than South Australia's other regions. Here, too, there are wonderfully complex soils, the schist and sandstone of the Mount Lofty Ranges, an astonishingly old geology by Californian or even European standards, formed in Precambrian times more than 540 million years ago.

"This mountain range actually predates fossils," Tim Weber of Manon Wines tells me, "so you don't find fossils here, but you do find alluvial diamonds."

Weber, a former vegetable farmer, and his wife, Monique Millton, (whose father pioneered New Zealand's biodynamic farming at the Millton Vineyard) run Manon on a small farm that resembles an escape-from-Williamsburg scenario you'd find in upstate New York. Despite starting just a couple of years ago, they've already had their wine featured at Noma, when the Copenhagen restaurant did a stint in Sydney—specifically their quixotic Wild Nature white, foraged from abandoned sauvignon blanc vines.

They've got good company in the hills, like The Other Right, founded by Alex Schulkin, an Israeli biochemist, and his wife, Galit Shachaf. Schulkin moved to Adelaide over a decade ago to apprentice with Anton van Klopper of Lucy Margaux and Domaine Lucci, a Basket Range pioneer and mentor of sorts to the current crew. The exceptional quality of Schulkin's wines, like a silken skin-fermented viognier called Moonlight, can be explained by his day job working on wine texture for the Australian Wine Research Institute.



SIX RISING STAR WINEMAKERS OF AUSTRALIA'S ADELAIDE HILLS

The Adelaide Hills—and, more specifically, the tiny town of Basket Range—has become ground zero for Australian wine's avant-garde. Here, six winemakers who are symbols of the New Australia.

[READ ON →](#)

He shares an old converted barn with James Erskine of Jauma, who moved to Adelaide as one of the country's leading sommeliers but decided he'd rather focus on making wine. He produces a range of minimalist wines, almost entirely bottled in crown caps, like Sand on Schist, a slightly woolly, apple-juicy white from 1942 chenin blanc vines some 28 miles south in Blewitt Springs—part of McLaren Vale.

That's not unusual: Many of the Basket Rangers' wines aren't actually from the area itself, in part because this is old orchard territory—and, unlike in Sonoma, there's little interest in pulling out apple and cherry trees. As often as not, the labels of Basket Range wines actually read McLaren Vale or Barossa.

This is the case, for instance, with Taras Ochota, probably the most renowned of the Rangers. Ochota's ancestors were Ukrainian migrants who grew grapes just north in the Clare Valley, and after a stint in the Adelaide punk band Kranktus, he began making wine, first for the well-known Two Hands label, and then scouting European vineyards for a large Swedish company, Oenoforos, along with time in California. He was drawn to the natural acidity of European wines—"that nervous sensation that wines have to stimulate your appetite," he says—and after he returned, he and his wife, Amber, settled up in the hills.

I spend an afternoon with the assembled Rangers at the chapel Ochota has converted into a little

weekend café. Mezcal bottles hung on meathooks dangle from the bar. We taste through a dizzying array of wines: a grenache from Jauma, Like Raindrops, made using carbonic maceration; The Other Right's Bright Young Pink, a pet-nat from pinot that vaguely resembles savory pink lemonade. From BK Wines comes Ovum, a quince-flavored pinot gris that brims with the tension that grape usually lacks.

And from Ochota there's The Price of Silence, a gamay that could tangle with Beaujolais, and The Fugazi, a grenache from McLaren Vale that's all subtle brushstrokes. That wine, like most of his wines, derives its name from punk bands—hence a syrah called I Am the Owl and a gewurztraminer titled Weird Berries in the Woods, both references to Dead Kennedys lyrics from 1982.

*I come from a land down under
Where beer does flow and men chunder
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?
You better run, you better take cover*
Men at Work, "Down Under" (1981)

On my final day in Adelaide, I drive the outskirts of the city, to make one more trip up to Basket Range. As I'm driving down Penfold Road, right past the old smokestack of the Penfolds Magill winery, the very heart of Old Australia, as if on cue, Men at Work comes on the radio.

You've got to be shitting me.

Twenty minutes later, I'm dodging barnyard chickens with Gareth Belton, who three years ago founded his own tiny label, Gentle Folk, which is best known for its wine Rainbows, a mix of 19 different grapes that's akin in its kitchen-sink spirit to a more-rosé-than-red blend like Jean-François Ganevat's J'en Veux from the Jura. Belton takes me to some of his favorite vineyards, including a small parcel of shrub-like chenin blanc, gewurztraminer and schiava, planted as a hobby by a local horticulturist.

"He planted the sexiest field blend in the country," says Belton, "and he probably doesn't even know it."

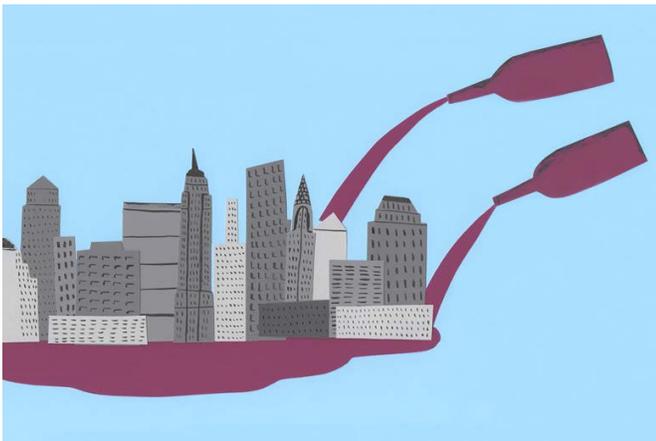
Belton, like most of the Rangers, is a recent arrival; he was previously a marine scientist working at the University of Adelaide, and his first vintage was just three years ago. So while he appreciates the current wave of fad that the Basket Range is enjoying, he's also not swayed by it. "What

happens in 25 years time,” he asks, “when there’s another region that’s far cooler than the Basket Range?”

We’re talking about climate, but the question could apply equally to matters of taste. Australia has learned the hard way that tastes can be fickle. For that reason, I’m not convinced that all the Basket Range wines will endure. Some feel overly guided by current fashion, and having witnessed the original arc of Australian cool, I wonder, as I did with some corners of the New California, if they’ll still feel relevant in five years.

But I’m also convinced there’s a lot in the New Australia that will endure. After its time in the wilderness, the country has embraced its course correction and set itself to the big question: *Where do we go now?* And there’s no one answer, which is fine. The Adelaide Hills are a microcosm of the changes taking place throughout the country, and a reminder of the potential that exists Down Under. After all, this has long been a land of plenty. Once again, that’s plain to see. — P

Related Articles



Long Island Wine's Hunt for a New Identity



Will the Real Jura Please Stand Up?

MORE STORIES YOU MAY LIKE

- [Champagne's Next Revolution Is Now](#)
- [Can the Savoie Become the Rhône's Rival Sister?](#)
- [The Great Equalizing of Natural Wine](#)

→ How Montlouis and Vouvray Became a Chenin Blanc Battleground

Tagged: [Adelaide Hills](#), [Australian wine](#), [Jon Bonne](#), [wine](#)

Jon Bonné, Senior Contributing Editor

Jon Bonné is senior contributing editor for PUNCH, wine columnist at *The San Francisco Chronicle* and author of *The New California Wine*. He is currently working on his next book, *The New French Wine*. He lives in New York City.



MORE BY

[Meet Greece's Best White Wines](#)

[How Saumur Became a Loire Valley Powerhouse](#)

[Crib Sheet: Your Guide to the Red Wines of Galicia](#)

[Searching for the New Australia in Shiraz Country](#)

[Your Guide to California Chardonnay's Third Wave](#)

FROM AROUND THE WEB



[How to Make Perfect Fried Eggs Every Time](#)



[These Will Be Your New Lunch Obsession](#)



[6 Things You Didn't Know About Oreo Cookies](#)



[The Only Way You Should Be Making Brussels Sprouts](#)

POPULAR ON PUNCH

1. **The Best Drink Books of Spring and Summer 2017**
COCKTAILS | PUNCH STAFF
2. **Meet Greece's Best White Wines**
WINE | JON BONNÉ
3. **Is There a Better Way to Make an Egg White Cocktail?**
COCKTAILS | ROGER KAMHOLZ
4. **The Charm of a Bar That Offers Nothing Special At All**
PLACES | JAMIE FELDMAR
5. **The Making of a Booze Emoji**
COCKTAILS | LIZZIE MUNRO



About Us

RSS Feed

Privacy

Contact

Advertise

Terms of Use

Copyright ©2017 Punch. All Rights Reserved.