

WINE News

*Wines of the Commonwealth:
Australia, New Zealand and
South Africa. England, too!*



AUGUST 14, 2017 FEATURES

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Summer Wines from Southern Climes

By Ryan Woodhouse

It's the middle of winter down in New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, while here in California a relentless summer has made the saturating rains of the 2016–17 season (the second-wettest winter since records began) nothing but a distant memory! And so here I will set out a few bright, refreshing summer wines not to be missed. In the pages that follow, my colleagues and I will run through some of the latest and greatest wines from the Southern Hemisphere that we have come across in the past few months—plus some new sparkling wines from southern England! Kirk Walker waxes poetic about the stunning wines of the

historic Rustenberg estate on the slopes of Simonsberg in Stellenbosch, South Africa (pictured above). Stefanie Juelsgaard has done a fantastic job of putting into words the magic wines of Virginia Willcock at Vasse Felix in Margaret River, Western Australia. I will do my best to convince you that Australian Chardonnays should be on the radar of every lover of the varietal (California and Burgundy drinkers alike) as their strength, diversity and quality continue to reach new heights. OK, now back to a summer-sipping, porch-pounding, smashable selection of wines to see you through the next heat wave that is undoubtedly not far away...

2016 Auntsfield “Single Vineyard” Southern Valleys Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough

(\$16.99) Our importer direct relationship means we can bring you this benchmark example of Marlborough SB at a shockingly reasonable price. This phenomenal vineyard is immaculately tended by the Cowley family. The wine has all you'd expect in juicy citrus fruit, white peach, passion fruit and currant leaf. There is also lovely texture from the low yields, clay-rich soils and small portion of fruit that is fermented in neutral French oak. **98 DC**



2016 Storm Point (Craven) Chenin Blanc Western Cape (\$14.99)

Made by renowned boutique winemaker Mike Craven, this is the entry level into his fascinating, very limited-availability wines. This Chenin comes mostly from old bush vines grown in ancient decomposed granite soils. It's packed with yellow fruits, citrus peel, stony minerals and toasted grains—all my classic markers for top-notch South African Chenin that often comes at a much higher price point! This has quickly become a go-to for our staff in the sub-\$20 range.



2015 Dandelion “Enchanted Garden” Riesling Eden Valley South Australia (\$16.99)

A remarkable wine from a 1910 planting of own-rooted Riesling high in Eden Valley, home to some of the finest Rieslings in the world. This is quite typical in its style: racy, focused acidity, intense stony minerality, citrus pith and more exotic notes of spiced mandarin. It can be drunk now as a fantastic palate cleanser with summer salads, delicate fish or spiced foods, or can be put away in the cellar—these wines age just as well as their European counterparts.



Wiston Estate: “English Method” Bubbly Back in the House!

By Ryan Woodhouse

Back by popular demand, we have another batch of Wiston Estate’s stunning wines. I firmly believe (and have for quite some time) that this estate makes the finest sparkling wines in England. With a slightly self-indulgent “I told you so” pat on my own back I’m very pleased to say Wiston’s 2013 South Downs Cuvée was recently recognized as such, taking the platinum trophy for “Best English Sparkling” at the Decanter World Wine Awards and received 95 points!

2013 Wiston “South Downs Cuvée” Brut West Sussex (\$39.99)

92 RP: “The 2013 Cuvée Brut is a blend of 47% Pinot Noir, 33% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Meunier that is 100% fermented in oak barrels. It has a clean and precise bouquet with scents of walnut, smoke and a touch of sea spray, the latter becoming more accentuated with time in the glass. The palate is fresh on the entry with a tang of ginger. This has impressive weight and sense of intent. It fans out nicely on the finish with a slight nettle-like note on the aftertaste. This is excellent!”

The **2010 Wiston Blanc de Blanc West Sussex (\$39.99)** is another disgorgement of the same wine we had in our last direct shipment, and it keeps getting better. This wine has now had a quite stunning six-and-a-half years resting on its lees! It combines beautifully rich,

toasty, brioche notes with a racy, crisp acidity and a mouthwatering “moreish” character—amazing! This wine was awarded 94 points by *Wine Enthusiast*, the highest-rated English sparkling wine in the tasting: “Sophisticated aromas of Golden Pearmain apples, cream and pastry take the part of the first violin—chalky, resonant earth that of the sonorous cello. Their harmony and elegance together is astonishing. The crisp acidity is so well-integrated and illuminates the fruit and soil. The long finish again emphasizes absolute, uncompromising elegance of this wine.” **94 DC, 91 RP**

If you’ve missed previous lots of these stunning wines, now is your chance to see what all the hype is about! Read more about Wiston Estate on our **On The Trail** blog.



Rustenberg: New World Wines from Very Old Dirt

By Kirk Walker

Stellenbosch is the starting point for most newcomers to the wines of South Africa. It is familiar yet exotic. Here are large, perfectly tended estates, as you would find in regions throughout the fine wine growing world, but they are framed by the dramatic and ancient Drackenstein mountains, and sometimes views of the False Bay.

Winemaking in the region dates back to the late seventeenth century, which Rustenberg and its vineyard holdings also date back to. Their cellars have been in continuous production since 1892—how many Old World producers, let alone New World producers, can say that? To keep following that line of thought, let me talk old dirt versus new dirt. I will compare Stellenbosch to Bordeaux—seeing as I will be talking about Cabernet and Cabernet blends:

I find it interesting that the youngest soils come from the Old World and were formed during the ice ages and the oldest soils come from South Africa, with their origins in the beginning of the age of the dinosaurs! But I digress—South Africa will do that to me. Before I get to the reds, let me get the white wine out of the way.

2015 Rustenberg Chardonnay Stellenbosch (\$17.99)

This wine comes across like white Burgundy. I do not know if it is because of the granite soils or the coastal climes, but for a full-malo



Chardonnay, this wine has freshness and drive that you do not normally see in New World wines, especially at this price point. The nose is toasty oak and cool fruits. The palate is cool stone fruits and sweet citrus framed by very reserved oak. This is will be a go-to Chardonnay this summer for me. **95 DC:** “Impressive Stellenbosch Chardonnay that wouldn’t look out of place in Corton-Charlemagne.”

The 2013 Rustenberg Cabernet Sauvignon Stellenbosch (\$19.99) is rich, complex and a great value.

The nose is spicy, tart cherries and Chinese five spice, minus the star anise, dusty earth and a touch of sweet oak. It is full-bodied with medium tannins. On the nose, earthy notes take on a fine, mineral quality. This wine calls out for lamb!

It would be fair to call the **2012 “John X Merriman” Bordeaux Blend Stellenbosch (\$29.99)** a South African St-Emilion. Even though it is 50% Cab, this has that dark, rich and exotic nose that makes me think of old-school St-Emilion. All five Chinese spices, with dusty leaves over dark berry compote. Like with the Cabernet the palate is brighter than the nose—a touch more red fruits, with less spice but more dried leaves and a leather component. This wine feels like it is just beginning to peak, but it has at least a decade of life in it. **90 RP**



This Ain't Burgundy...But It Sure is Good!

By Ryan Woodhouse

Chardonnay is a unique grape. I'm not sure I know another that can be such a stunningly clear lens through which a specific terroir can be brought into sharp focus. Yet this grape can also be a vast blank canvas that readily receives every fleeting idea or technique of the artist (in this case, the winemaker). The range of expressions one can find from the Chardonnay grape is almost limitless, and it seems that every diverse rendering has its own loyal band of disciples. These renditions stretch from the bright, mineral-driven wines of Chablis with their nervous acidity and oyster shell-infused flavors, through to the big, bold, oaky, buttery Chardonnays that California (among other places) has become famous for.

Despite the fact that Rombauer (which seems to have the patent on the archetypal "California Chard") remains one of the best-selling wines in all of K&L, I believe the "Gold Standard" for true enthusiasts of this grape remains the wines of its ancestral home, Burgundy. So many times while tasting wines from all over the world, I have heard those words muttered: "Umm, it's very Burgundian." Is this the ultimate compliment for aspiring Chardonnays (or their creators) across the globe? What does that comparison actually mean? I recently gave this some thought, and here's what I came up with:

More "mineral driven" in style (i.e. less overt fruit)

Less oak-influenced (at least in the toasty, sweetly wooded sense)

Brighter/higher acidity (more than likely, less malo/diacetyl, i.e. not buttery)

It seems that abiding by these principles allows the Chardonnay grape to retain its sense of place but also leaves just enough material from which the winemaker can sculpt a distinctive form and showcase their own artistry.

One place I believe that is particularly good at striking this balance is Australia. Though Australia might not be at the forefront of many people's minds when it comes to Chardonnay, I believe that it deserves to be. Several regions across this vast continent produce stunning and distinctive Chardonnays that have long been recognized as world-class expressions of this noble grape. Nowhere in the world has the vast stylistic breadth of Chardonnay been so clearly delineated as it has in Australia, from the big, oaky, ripe, butter bombs to iconic wines such as Leeuwin Estate's prestigious "Art Series" Chardonnay; edgy "new-wave" styles like the flinty, smoky, textural wines of Brandon Keys in the Adelaide Hills and the downright racy, mineral, leaner styles like those of Woodlands Estate. All of these wines are very expressive of their sense of place but they also represent the various approaches of the winemakers behind them as they seek to hone their own particular piece of vinous art as they best see fit. It's a really exciting time to be a Chardonnay lover...and Australia deserves your full attention.



Vineyards of Leeuwin Estate in summer.

2013 Leeuwin Estate "Art Series" Chardonnay Margaret River Western Australia (\$64.99) One of the truly legendary wines of Australia. Powerful and rich but with intense underlying minerality from Margaret River's ancient sandstone gravels. Just as age-worthy as fine Grand Cru Burgundy and just as deserving to be in the cellar. **98 JH, 96 WS, 94 JS**

2014 Leeuwin Estate "Prelude" Chardonnay Margaret River Western Australia (\$24.99) The little brother to the "Art Series," this bottling captures the essence of this great estate in a slightly less concentrated, structured, phenolic style. Beautifully balanced ripeness with mouthwatering acidity, a whiff of fine-grained oak and stony minerals. Fantastic value. **94 JH, 92 JS, 91 WS**

2013 BK Wines "Swaby" Chardonnay Adelaide Hills South Australia (\$39.99) I think BK (Brendon Keys) wines are some of the best examples of the winemaking "revolution" that has happened/is happening across Australia. He's not scared to apply some slightly alternative techniques in the cellar but at the same time has absolute respect for the varietal and its origin. The Swaby Chardonnay deliberately flirts with reduction—a smoky, flinty, gunpowder nose with juicy, ripe yellow stone fruits, bread dough, dried apricot and nougat. A complex wine, rich and textural from time on lees but not at all flabby. The acidity and vibrancy of the fruit are a hallmark of Adelaide Hills, the wonderfully edgy character the imprint of the craftsman himself. **95 JH, 93 VN.**

2015 Woodlands "Wilyabrup Valley" Chardonnay Margaret River Western Australia (\$24.99) A lovely and more restrained style of Margaret River Chard. Fruit from vineyards situated in the Wilyabrup subregion, known as one of the finest terroirs in the country. This is more citrus-driven in style, with fresh acidity and elegant texture. It's barrel-fermented with wild yeast but only sees 10% new wood, keeping the oak profile subtle and the mineral aspect front and center. Some baked orchard fruits (pear, mostly) come through with time in the glass. A stunning, linear, refined expression. **94 JH, 92 JS**



Vasse Felix: Margaret River's Oldest Winery is One of Its Best

By Stefanie Juelsgaard

As Margaret River's oldest winery, Vasse Felix could probably sell their wine through reputation alone. But they aren't kicking back and relying on their name. They are pushing the boundaries of their winemaking style and viticultural practices and making some of the best wine they've ever produced in their 50-year history.

It's rare that a single region can produce both absolutely phenomenal Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon at the same time. In most places the weather does not suit both grapes equally well. But Margaret River's maritime positioning and geology give it a unique opportunity to make spectacular wines with both varietals mimicking Bordeaux and Burgundy simultaneously.

Most wineries will bottle their entry-level wine with grapes purchased from other growers, but Vasse Felix produces all of their wines with grapes grown on their estate. In order to capture the flavors of grapes grown in the unique environment of Margaret River, they say they practice a "hands-off" approach in both viticulture and winemaking.

I was fortunate enough to sit down recently with chief winemaker Virginia Willcock to taste through her lineup of Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon from the Filius wines up to their Icon wines, Tom Cullity and Heytesbury. While the Filius wines are more approachable and tend toward the fruit-forward now, they are in no way less complex, interesting or delicious. As much care goes into her entry-level bottlings as the top-of-the-line wines and the wines definitely show that care. It's rare that I find a winery where I enjoy every single bottling they make, but Vasse Felix impressed me every step of the way. They are a truly impressive winery and their painstaking efforts are putting forth some absolutely phenomenal wines.



2014 Vasse Felix "Filius" Cabernet Sauvignon Margaret River Western Australia (\$19.99) The blend is 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Malbec and 2% Petit Verdot. The Filius label tends toward a little more softness and richness than the Premier or Icon wines, which are meant for more aging. I am excited to find these wines drinkable now, as I can hold onto the Vasse Felix Cabernet or Tom Cullity for a few years and still be able to drink a delicious wine from this remarkable producer. If you are new to Margaret River Cabs, this wine is the best introduction you could possibly get. **90 RP**

2015 Vasse Felix "Filius" Chardonnay Margaret River Western Australia (\$19.99) As expressive and well-balanced a Chardonnay as you'll find in Burgundy, but for a quarter of the price, and one that truly showcases the maritime climate of Margaret River. The minerality and slight salinity shine though and the juiciness is highlighted by the acid retained due to the cooling ocean winds. This wine does carry some body and weight as well, which counterbalances the brightness nicely. It has a long finish and brings great intensity. **92 WS**



2013 Vasse Felix Cabernet Sauvignon Margaret River Western Australia (\$29.99) 92% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Malbec and 1% Petit Verdot. They have taken the principles from Bordeaux and applied them to what works for Margaret River. Showing more structure, nuance and savory notes than the Filius Cab, the premier level is unbelievably good and I think will please both California Cabernet and Bordeaux lovers. The small addition of Malbec brings the fruit forward, while the Cab displays classic Margaret River notes of cedar and powdery earth. Fine tannins are present and keep the wine from being too plush, but at the same time are not drying or harsh. Maturation was in 100% French oak for 18 months, 46% new and 54% one to four years old. **95 JH, 93 JS, 93 WE**

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