

Wines of **Australia**



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by David Raezer and Jennifer Raezer

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Contents

Introduction

Vintages

Primary Red Grape Varieties

Primary White Grape Varieties

Australia's Wine Regions

New South Wales

Queensland

* South Australia

Tasmania

* Victoria

* Western Australia

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Introduction

Previewing this book?

Please [check out our enhanced preview](#), which offers a deeper look at this guidebook.

The breadth and depth of Australia's wine landscape is simply astonishing. The country's wine production is spread out across **six massive regions** -- New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia -- that run along the southern edge of the country, each with myriad terroirs that serve to give their wines unique expressions.

This Approach Guide begins by offering a **straightforward vintage ratings table**, which affords high-level insight into the best and most challenging years for wine production in Australia. It then describes the country's **primary red and white grape varieties**. Finally and most important, this guide provides **a detailed, region-by-region review**. For each region, this guide profiles all of its appellations, pointing out the best wines and what makes them distinctive.

Rather than seek to tell you what specific bottle of wine to order, we give guidance as to how to approach ordering the most appropriate wine for the region and your personal tastes. When appropriate, we have let our opinions be known. Ease of reference and accessibility have led us to employ a bullet-point based format.

* **Look for the asterisks.** We mark each of our favorite regions, grape varieties, and appellations with an asterisk (*) — they have a record for providing quality, consistency, and good values.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique guide to the wines of Australia.

Have a great trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides

P.S. We have also designed this guide as a [wine app for the iPhone or iPad \(www.agwine.com\)](http://www.agwine.com)

Primary Red Grape Varieties

Red Grape Varieties

* Cabernet Sauvignon

While cabernet sauvignon assumes center stage in most New World country's red wine portfolios, **it takes a backseat in Australia to shiraz**; despite its secondary position, however, cabernet sauvignon delivers some excellent, world class wines in Australia! Classic cabernet sauvignon flavors include plum, currant, dark cherry, licorice, lead pencil, and spice.

A simple rule of thumb: In cabernet-based wines from **warmer environments**, flavors will be dark, soft, and generous. In **cooler environments**, wines increase their structuring tannins, retain greater acidity, and take on slightly more earthy and herbal flavor characteristics; tell-tale cool environment flavors include bell pepper, olive, and oregano.

That said, Australia's two best versions of cabernet sauvignon are derived from the cooler appellations of **Coonawarra** and **Margaret River**, the former offering full-bodied, fruit-forward versions as compared to the latter's tighter, more restrained versions. **Currency Creek** (cool temperature style) and **Clare Valley** (warm temperature style) are also producing high quality versions.

Chambourcin

Chambourcin, a hybrid red variety selected for its resistance to fungal disease, yields dark colored, highly aromatic, full-bodied wines that exhibit juicy fruit flavors (sometimes with gamey notes), but can lack sufficient structuring acidity; these wines might be worth a try for the adventurous drinker in search of new experiences.

Look to the **Hastings River** appellation for the best wines based on this rare grape variety

* Durif (a.k.a petite sirah)

See our discussion below for more detail on this grape.

Merlot

Merlot, often highly featured as single varietal wines in most New World wine producing countries, is used primarily **used as blending grape in Australia**, serving to fill out cabernet sauvignon-dominated wines. Specifically, merlot adds body and fruitiness (dark cherry, plum, violet, chocolate, and herb). In order to get merlot just right, winemakers need to have an appellation that sup-

Primary White Grape Varieties

White Grape Varieties

* Chardonnay

Chardonnay is **the leading white grape variety in Australia**. And there are basically two styles of Chardonnay you are likely to encounter and these will largely be determined by the climate in which the appellation is located:

- **fruity and softer style.** These are generous and approachable whites, with big flavors of tropical fruit (pineapple, mango), fig, honey, melon, and spice. This style typically prevails in appellations with warmer climates.
- **concentrated and restrained style.** These are harder, more concentrated, and more acidic wines that gravitate more toward citrus flavors, such as grapefruit and lemon; they also typically rely on earthier flavor elements. As you might have guessed, this style prevails in cooler climates.

Chardonnay has naturally high acidity and responds well to aging in oak barrels, which adds toasty and vanilla elements to the wines. These wines also often undergo malolactic fermentation (which serves to impart a creaminess to the finished product) and *sur lie* aging (which adds depth of flavor by allowing the wine to sit on its natural, fermentation-derived sediment). Australian chardonnay reaches its greatest heights in the cool climates of the **Margaret River, Yarra Valley, Geelong,** and **Pemberton** appellations.

* Riesling

One of the world's great white wine varieties, riesling delivers a gentle aromatic nose, with complex flavors of fruit and flowers, and high acidity. Unlike their Old World counterparts, Australian wine-makers produce rieslings nearly exclusively as dry wines.

The riesling grape variety likes cooler climates. Accordingly, it reaches its greatest Australian heights in the Clare Valley and Eden Valley appellations of South Australia which deliver crisp versions with flavors of citrus and stone fruit, overlaying a mineral backbone. High quality riesling is also produced in the following appellations, spanning a range of styles: **Coonawarra** (delicate, complex), **Great Southern** (great complexity and subtlety), **Tasmania** (crisp and perfumed), and **Barossa Valley** (more rounded and full-flavored).

Sauvignon Blanc

Sauvignon blanc is grown throughout Australia, usually coming in number two right behind chardonnay. In general, sauvignon blanc-based wines exhibit high acidity and a lighter, more elegant

Australia's Wine Regions



In the region-by-region review that follows, **we have marked our favorite regions, grape varieties, and denominations** — judged so for producing consistently high quality wines at attractive prices — with asterisks (*).

New South Wales



Introduction

New South Wales — consisting of 14 appellations (called ‘regions’ in Australia) spread over eight winegrowing zones — is Australia’s oldest winegrowing state and the home of Australia’s most famous appellation, **Hunter Valley**. While Hunter Valley leads with its excellent full-bodied shiraz and decadent semillon, there are many other appellations making high quality wines in New South Wales. Look to **Mudgee** for shiraz and chardonnay, **Orange** and **Gundagai** for high quality cabernet sauvignon and shiraz, and **Tumbarumba** for sparkling wines.

Red Wine Appellations

- **Canberra District.** Canberra District, one of four appellations (along with Tumbarumba, Hilltops, and Gundagai) in the Southern New South Wales Zone, is a dry, cool climate, high altitude (500-850 meters) appellation. Canberra does its best with red wines, and **shiraz is its most successful variety**. The style of Canberra shiraz is medium-bodied, soft and fruit-forward with concentrated dark cherry, plum, and blackberry fruit; there is often a hint of pepper and usually approachable tannins. Some of the best are blended with small amounts of viognier. Cabernet sauvignon is also made; it is usually blended with merlot to produce quality wines in a range of styles. Pinot noir-based wines can be very good, but are less consistent from vintage to vintage.
- **Cowra.** Cowra, one of three appellations (with Orange and Mudgee) in the Central Ranges Zone, is a hot climate appellation, the warmest of the Central Ranges triad despite its closer proximity to the sea, due to its lower altitude. Cowra is focused on bulk white wines based, first and foremost, upon chardonnay. Its red wines are a disappointment. Look elsewhere.
- **Gundagai.** Gundagai, the lowest altitude of the four appellations (along with Tumbarumba, Canberra, and Hilltops) in the Southern New South Wales Zone, is generally (with the exception of the cool Tumut sub-appellation) an even, continental (warm days, cool nights) appellation. **The appellation is relatively new and still emerging.** Gundagai does its best with red wines, based primarily on shiraz and cabernet sauvignon. Both are crafted into full-bodied wines that take on the profile of warm climate versions, offering generous, approachable fruit and easy tannins.
- **Hastings River.** Hastings River, located in the Northern Rivers Zone, is a warm, wet climate appellation. Hastings River does better on average with its white wines than its red wines. Chambourcin, a hybrid red variety selected for its resistance to fungal disease (a real threat in the Hasting River’s damp climate), yields dark colored, highly aromatic, full-bodied wines that exhibit juicy fruit flavors (sometimes with gamey notes), but can lack sufficient structuring acidity. Shiraz and cabernet sauvignon are also grown to largely mediocre outcome.
- **Hilltops.** Hilltops, one of the four appellations (along with Tumbarumba, Canberra, and Gundagai) in the Southern New South Wales Zone, experiences an even, continental (warm days, cool nights) climate. Hilltops concentrates on and achieves its best results with its red wines, based primarily on shiraz, cabernet sauvignon, and merlot. Wines from all three varieties, as you would expect, are balanced, delivering both cool climate (herbs, pepper, spice, acidity, and some concentrated dark fruit) and warm climate elements (easy tannins, chocolate, mint, blackberry, cassis).
- * **Hunter Valley.** Australia’s **oldest and most famous appellation**, Hunter Valley experiences a hot and wet climate, its regular rainfall and cloud cover serving to moderate temperatures such that they are better suited to growing grapes for premier quality wines.

* Victoria



Introduction

Victoria — consisting of 21 appellations (called ‘regions’ in Australia) spread over 6 winegrowing zones — is a relatively small, but concentrated winegrowing state. It is important to point out that **Australia is one of the few New World wine-producing countries that is successful with pinot noir, and Victoria’s Port Phillip Zone — specifically the Yarra Valley, Mornington Peninsula, and Geelong appellations — is the epicenter of quality production.**

Victoria’s success with pinot noir, however, has not come at the expense of Australia’s favorite red grape variety, shiraz; the state delivers some very high quality versions, including those from the Bendigo, Grampians, Goulburn Valley, Rutherglen, Beechworth, Glenrowan, and Heathcote appellations.

As far as whites are concerned, chardonnay is the strongest variety, particularly versions from the Yarra Valley, Geelong, and Henty. Finally, we would be remiss not to mention the **excellent sweet wines** coming from the Glenrowan and Rutherglen appellations.

Red Wine Appellations

- **Alpine Valleys.** Alpine Valleys, located in the North East Victoria Zone, is generally a cool climate appellation; as its neighbor King Valley, it is oriented toward grape growing rather than wine production, as it sells much of its grape production to wineries throughout South Australia. Merlot, shiraz, and cabernet sauvignon grape varieties yield largely **simple, unimpressive wines**. We recommend looking to other appellations.
- * **Beechworth.** Beechworth, located in the North East Victoria Zone, despite variability derived from varied altitudes (300 to 720 meters), is generally a cool climate appellation. This is a tiny appellation with a small number of gifted and dedicated winemakers producing **exceptionally high quality wines**; the only negative: low production levels make procuring bottles difficult. **Shiraz yields the appellation’s best reds, of very high quality and distinction.** In many respects, they resemble in complexity those of Northern Rhône Valley’s Côte Rotie, with flavors of dark fruit (plum, blackberry), spice, tobacco, meat, and earth. Although never reaching the heights of shiraz, pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, and merlot are all made to high standards, with generally cold weather flavor personalities.
- **Bendigo.** Bendigo, on the western part of the Central Victoria Zone, experiences an even, continental climate, with warm days and cool evenings. Bendigo is known for its **robust reds**, based first and foremost, on the shiraz variety. These wines are quite dark colored, full bodied, packed with abundant cherry fruit and spice flavors, with Bendigo **trademark mint highlights**; tannins are big and not missed, but generally soft and approachable. Cabernet sauvignon is also grown to good effect, exhibiting a similar full-bodied profile and trademark minty notes; flavors touch on tobacco, blackberry, currant, and herb.
- * **Geelong.** Geelong, located in the Port Phillip Zone, is cool temperature appellation; demanding growing conditions — foremost among them strong winds, low precipitation, and hard clay subsoils — serve to keep yields low, therefore, flavor intensity high. A cool climate and demanding conditions ... this must be pinot territory ... and that it is. **Pinot noir is the leading grape variety in Geelong, producing impressive wines that are aromatic, complex, and intensely-flavored with red fruits and gentle spice flavors.** Shiraz is also naturally well-suited to Geelong, producing well-crafted wines; while cabernet sauvignon-based wines are often successful, they are the weakest of the three.

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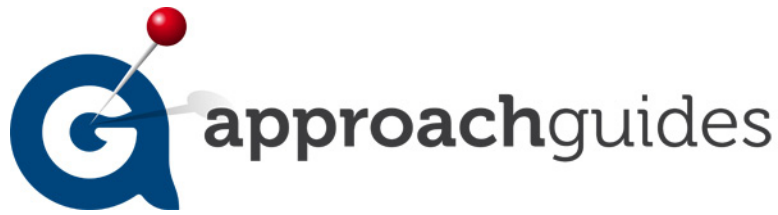
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Los Angeles Times

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