

Hitting the right wine note Down Under

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It seems that wine producers from around the world are zooming in on China as a huge potential market for their wares, and many are entering the marketplace via the portals of Hong Kong. Of course wine aficionados here are on the increase also, thereby providing an even bigger audience.

Last week it was the turn of Victoria in Australia, and 25 wineries came to participate in Roy Moorfield's annual wine extravaganza and "Duck Crawl". A stalwart of the wine scene in Victoria and Cathay Pacific's chief wine taster/selector, Moorfield introduces a number of wineries to our fair city each year; each has the potential to satisfy palates on both sides of the harbour. What kind of wine was showing this year?

From the three tastings I attended, my overall conclusion is that Australia is hitting just the right notes with fresh, lighter-on-the palate wines of supple finesse and distinction. There wasn't a duffer in the lot, each had their own style, and, as I've maintained before the wines reflect the character of the winemaker. Here are some of the highlights of the shows, culminating in the annual "Duck Crawl" dinner (a magical pairing of duck dishes and Pinot Noir wines) that is open to the public.

First up was Amulet vineyard presented by Susan Thornton. The range has good Shiraz and Merlot-Cabernet but the most outstanding was the Amulet Rosato 2004; a blend of Sangiovese, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon, the lovely onion skin coloured wine is perfect for Hong Kong's climate.

So too is the Verdelho 2004 from Gentle Annie vineyards (www.gentle-annie.com). Very different to the spritzy wines made from the same grape in Portugal, it is a smooth, delicate all-day wine of first-rate character.

Social drinkers were the first to appreciate the fine nuances of white wines simply because it doesn't stain the teeth! But the trend is growing. Try tasting without seeing the colour could you tell the difference between red and white?

Started as a hobby by Graeme and Maggie Ray in 1978, Boggy Creek Vineyards has moved up in the quality stakes over the years. Now making a range from Riesling to Barbera and Cabernet Sauvignon, their Barbera Sangiovese 2003 is an attractive rose which avoids that awful sweetness some roses have; it is ready for drinking now.

Rating four stars from Australia's wine guru/critic James Halliday, Box Stallion produces some remarkable Shiraz. The Enclosure 2002 is spicy, savoury and elegant and is only rivalled by their sexy Red Barn Pinot Noir.

An impressive wine, the Sanguine Estate Heathcote Shiraz 2004 is already showing lush blackberry, dark plum and liquorice flavours, with good concentration and rich long finish; ready to drink now the 2003 has lip-smacking salami notes on the middle palate. Amazingly, the vineyard was only started in 1997 and the winemaker, son of the house Mark Hunter, is not yet 30 years old but his wines show exceptional intensity and complexity.

At the Duck Crawl dinner held in the splendiferous T'ang Court of the Langham hotel on Peking Road, the wine chosen to complement minced Duck in Lettuce Leaves, was Stumpy Gully Mornington Peninsula Pinot Noir 2004 from Zanvoort Estate in Victoria region. A growing number of wineries in Australia now have women winemakers in their teams, Stumpy Gully has two Wendy Zantvoort and her daughter Maitena; their skills are reflected in wines of subtle complexity and elegant character.

Along with other wineries from Victoria at the shows, Seven Sisters, Dromana, Carlei, Boggy Creek, Taltarni, Giant Steps, Galli, Bannockburn, Olsen, Yering Station, Sandhurst Ridge and Nicholson River (fantastic full-mouth Chardonnays) are showing the rewarding trends of wines we can expect from Australia. I'll keep you posted on local sources.

In the meantime, you have to hand it to the Australians for coming up with fashionable wines that conform to today's penchant for healthy foods and lighter flavours and for naming their vineyards so engagingly!

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