



## Made in the USA

Thanks to our strong dollar, some excellent US wines are finally making their mark locally, writes Max Allen.

It's puzzled me for years why we don't drink more wine from the United States. Australian drinkers, after all, are an enthusiastically catholic mob. We drink New Zealand wine by the gallon. We love French wine, especially if it's Champagne. Spanish wines and Italian wines and Portuguese wines are all dead trendy. But American wines? You'd struggle to stumble across any at your local bottle shop, and forget finding more than a couple on all but the most encyclopedic wine lists.

Luckily, this is beginning to change. American wines are now, finally, creeping into the Australian wine-drinker's consciousness. Whether it's one of the brilliant pinots from Oregon or a new-wave Napa Valley cabernet, you're now likely to find at least something with an American flavour out there in restaurant- and bottle shop-land.

So, why has it taken the US so long to join the imported wine boom? And what are the American wines you should be looking out for?

I have a couple of theories about why we haven't been more interested. For a start, the perception of American wines used to be that they're too similar to Australian wines: they're made from familiar grape varieties such as chardonnay and cabernet, often in warm-climate wine regions. Why should we drink Californian chardonnay when there's plenty of Australian chardonnay on offer? Not only that but until quite recently the exchange rate meant that US wines on Australian shelves and lists were dauntingly expensive.

Things are different now. For a start, the Aussie dollar is much stronger against the greenback. Also, high quality Australian wines cost more than they used to. Both of these changes combined means that some US wines are now priced more competitively (the rare and most highly regarded bottles still tend to be on the pricey side). More importantly, though, there's a greater range of American wines available here now – a diverse array of regions, grape varieties and wine styles that offer a taste of something quite different.

Two of our better wine merchants are shipping some of the best wines out of Sonoma, a region in California that is cooler and more coastal than the better-known Napa Valley. Ridge Vineyards (available through Vintage Cellars) has a well-established reputation for producing spectacular, dense, multi-layered red wines. Some of Ridge's best wines, such as the wild and funky single vineyard red called Geyserville, are "field blends" of zinfandel, that uniquely Californian grape, with under-rated but deeply flavoursome grapes such as petite sirah (we know it as durif), alicante bouschet and carignane.

The Prince Wine Store imports the wonderful Sonoma wines of Ted Lemon at Littorai. These are single-site chardonnays and pinot noirs with incredible refinement and haunting complexity. Articulate and passionate, Lemon is also making his mark a little closer to home as head winemaker at Burn Cottage vineyard, source of one of the most impressive and powerful new pinots to emerge from Central Otago in New Zealand.

Specialist importers Pinot Now are responsible for shipping most of the great Oregon wines you'll find. While some of these pinots (such as those from Beaux Frères, part-owned by guru wine critic Robert Parker Jr) are priced like Grand Cru red Burgundies, others – such as Le Puits Sec pinot from organic vineyard Evesham Wood – are no more expensive than the best pinots from the Mornington Peninsula or the Yarra Valley. And stylistically, they're quite different: Oregon is cooler and wetter than California, and its pinots have both a very New World weight of dark cherry fruit and a very Old World savoury quality.

A Melbourne-based couple, winemaker Michelle Edwards and viticulturist Daniel Fischl, have just launched in Australia a cabernet they made in 2008 in the Napa Valley under their own, new Linnaea label. Called Rhizotomi, the wine was sourced, says Edwards, from a rocky knoll of volcanic detritus halfway up Howell Mountain on the eastern wall of the Napa Valley. >

**Wine couple**  
Winemaker Michelle Edwards and viticulturist Daniel Fischl have released a Napa Valley cabernet under their label Linnaea.

# WINE

overlooking the town of St Helena. "We've noticed that the few Napa wines that are available in Australia have tended to be from the overstuffed, corporate wineries," she says. "We wanted to offer a wine that represented the elite tier of the region, a wine that holds the density and purity locked in the igneous soils." And they've succeeded: while there is plenty of dark, glossy, plummy fruit in the wine, it also has a baked-earth, terracotta-like dry texture that sets it apart.

Thanks to the importing efforts of West Australian winemaker Brad Wehr (Wine by Brad, Mantra), the often challenging, always delicious results of philosopher-jester Randall Grahm's vinous musings are also available in Australia now. Grahm is the mad genius behind the biodynamic Bonny Doon Vineyard: his Cigare Volant (a savoury, spicy red Rhône blend) and Cigare Blanc (a peachy/creamy blend of roussanne and grenache blanc) are the vineyard's standard bearers, but Wehr is also shipping the taut and sinewy Le Pousseur Syrah and a wild, roasted-meaty carignane blend called Contra, both from the warm Central Coast region.

Randall Grahm may be the best-known of California's wildman winemakers, but the state is home to plenty of others. Sean Thackrey, for example (whose wines are shipped – albeit in painfully limited quantity – by Vacluse Cellars and Fesq & Company), is both an erudite wine scholar (he posts obscure oenological texts on his rich and informative website) and an intuitive winemaker who fashions jaw-droppingly good reds such as the Orion old-vine syrah and the Arquila sangiovese.

With bottles like these gracing the shelves of our better wine merchants and the lists of our better bars and restaurants, the future for American wines in Australia looks good.\*