



## Food Service News

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# Elegance, grace and purity of fruit

With all the news coming out of Canberra in recent months it's good to know there's something other than politics to grab people's attention. This month **Jim McMahon** explores the wines of Canberra with surprising results.

**Canberra has a** rich history when it comes to winemaking, a history going back to the 1860s. The renaissance of the Canberra wine region came in 1973 when such people as Dr John Kirk planted at Clonakilla (Est 1971) and Dr Riek at Lake George (Est in 1971). Both, interestingly enough, were former CSIRO scientists and were followed by many more scientists who also decided to retire to plant vines and make wine. Today there are 33 wineries bordering the Canberra region set along the Barton Highway at Murrumbateman, the Federal Highway at Lake George and Bungendore (although officially they are situated in NSW).

The climate is continental with cold nights and long hot summer days. The altitude varies from 500m to 880m with an average rainfall of around 600mm. The weekend I was there recently, it did nothing but rain incessantly the whole time. This will however give the vines a head start as we head into spring. I was blown away by the improvement in quality of wines coming out of Canberra since my last visit in 2003. The region is noted for its Rieslings, Sparklings and Shiraz and it begs the question of the readers of this magazine, "How many wines from the Canberra region do you have on your wine list?" I bet I know the answer.

Perhaps the time is right to review your wine list and look at what's on offer from this region. As well as the two best-known names in the Canberra wine region, Clonakilla and Helm Wines, there is a plethora of wineries that perhaps you wouldn't know, such as Yarra, Long Rail Gully, Doonkuna, Dionysus, McKellar Ridge, Jeir Creek, Gallagher and Granitevale Estate, to name a few.

Yarra Wines, situated at Murrumbateman off the Barton Highway, is a small, six-hectare property that boasts many medal-winning wines. Try its 2009 Half Dry Riesling (\$19) which has a lovely perfumed nose with a long fruit-driven acid finish. Its 2008 Pinot Noir

(\$25) is another wine of note with a nose of perfumed red cherry spice and loads of pinot fruit on the palate. Long Rail Gully, also at Murrumbateman, has an array of top quality wines which blew me away. There were many in the line-up such as its 2005 Riesling (\$17), 2009 Pinot Gris (\$20.50), 2004 Merlot (\$22), 2007 Pinot Noir (\$28) and 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$22). Winemaker Richard Parker is not into blends, and the quality of all his wines was simply a revelation. Getting away from the bad weather, I took sanctuary in Yass Valley Wines and had a very nice lunch of chicken pie with al dente veggies washed down with a very agreeable glass of its 2008 Barbera which matched perfectly. The restaurant food, together with blackboard specials, comes highly recommended, as does the 2007 Barbera, made in a lighter, fruitier style.

Refreshed, I moved on to my next port of call which was Dionysus Winery (Dionysus being the Greek god of wine) where I tasted its 2009 Sauvignon Blanc (\$10 – couldn't believe the price) and 2008 Pinot Noir (\$25). But their 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon was the standout (\$22). I'd had the wine the night before over dinner (with a number of winemakers present at Schonegg Country Guest House) and recalled being impressed. It was sensational; the palate was showing ripe, rich blackcurrant fruit combined with spicy savoury oak and wine texture which made me sit up and take note. It was the best Cabernet I tasted while in the region.

Next stop was Doonkuna Winery, one of those winery names that has been around for years but slipped below the radar in recent times. A wide array of wine styles is produced here, including Sparkling, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz, and I'm reliably informed that as of next year, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel and Tempranillo will be back on line. I found the 2009 Doonkuna Riesling to be refreshingly crisp on the palate, with an intense lime



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streak on a long crisp acid finish. For \$20 it was sublime.

Next up was something out of the blue by way of a chocolate tasting matched with wines from multi-award winning robyn rowe chocolates. It won Champion Chocolate at The Sydney Royal Cheese and Dairy Show in both 2009 and 2010. What an education it was to match red wines with milk and dark chocolates. They used nothing but the best ingredients, including Belgian Callebaut couverture (a term used for chocolates rich in cocoa butter). The chocolates were exquisite and a perfect match was found with many wines, in particular the Dionysus 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon with many of her pralines. Permission has now been granted for Robyn and her husband Dennis to build their own chocolate factory-cum-café with a hands-on kitchen and lecture theatre where chocolates will be matched with Canberra wines.

Dinner with some of the local winemakers at Flint Restaurant situated at Shaw Estate Wines was an eventful evening. The special on the night was possum pie. Not having had this nocturnal creature on a plate before, it was something to behold. A couple of us were game enough to taste it, but not order it as a main. Flakey puff pastry held lashings of meat which appeared to be cut into slivers, matched with Long Rail Gully 2006 Shiraz which was sensational. Apparently possum is farmed in both Darwin and Tasmania and this little creature came from Tassie all vacuum-packed and ready to go. I also tasted the Long Rail Gully 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon with Barramundi Meuniere (brown lemon butter) and it drank perfectly well with this dish, as did the Helm 2010 Classic Dry Riesling. The old rule of white wines and white meats and red wines with red meats is dead. Remember to try something different; you'll be surprised.

An early start on the Sunday morning saw us tasting at McKellar Ridge. First up was its 2008 Sauvignon Blanc (\$18), followed by the 2010 Riesling (\$20), 2008 Basket Press Shiraz/Viognier (\$28), 2008 Merlot/Cab/Franc (\$28) and 2008 Cab/Sauv/Franc/Merlot (\$28). The best in this line-up was its 2008 Shiraz/Viognier with expressive apricot and herbal lift on the nose, which carried through onto the palate. Velvety silky tannins and voluptuous fruit with a firm acid, tannin oak structure.

From here I was off to Jeir Creek. It has an extensive line-up of wines and I tasted all 11 of them: the 2008 Sparkling Chardonnay/Pinot Noir (\$30), 2010 Riesling (\$20), 2010 Sauvignon Blanc (\$20), 2008 Un-wooded Chardonnay (\$20), 2006 Chardonnay (\$25), 2008 Pinot Noir (\$25), 2005 Cabernet Merlot (\$25), 2008 Shiraz/Viognier (\$25), 2006 Sparkling Shiraz/Viognier (\$30), 2008 Botrytis Semillon Sauvignon Blanc 285mls (\$25) and the Muscat 375ml (\$30). A very big improvement across the whole range since my last visit, but the two standouts for me in this range were the 2009 Riesling and 2008

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Shiraz/Viognier. Although I don't like sparkling reds per se, the 2006 Sparkling Shiraz/Viognier was a cracker.

With two wineries to go, the next was Gallagher; tasted the whole range which included the 2006 Blanc de Blanc which was sensational (\$35), NV Pinot Chardonnay (\$25), 2009 Riesling (\$18), 2009 Sauvignon Blanc (\$18), 2009 Chardonnay (\$18), 2008 Merlot (\$22), 2008 Shiraz (\$22 ) and 2007 Sparkling Shiraz (\$35). A very good line-up of wines with the sparkling wines in particular standing out.

Finally, my last winery was little known Granitevale Estate where I tasted all the wines in its portfolio: NV Sparkling Sauvignon Blanc (\$25), 2008 Sauvignon Blanc (\$18), 2009 Riesling (\$18), 2005 Shiraz, 2005 Merlot and 2006 Merlot (\$22), 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon

and 2008 (\$22) Botrytis Sauvignon Blanc 375ml (\$25). The 2005 Shiraz was brilliant, with voluptuous ripe tannins and a firm acid tannin oak structure.

Overall the Canberra wine region was an eye-opener in regards to both quality and the number of styles produced since my last visit. While the prices given to each of the wines I tasted are what they call cellar door prices, you can bet your bottom dollar that from a trade point of view there are win/win prices to be had for those of you who seek out these wines for your enterprise. If there is an overall impression of the whites and sparklings from this region, it would be their naturally high acidity and purity of fruit. In the reds they offer elegance, grace and balance. Many of the wines mentioned above would be a valuable addition to any wine list.

