

# Finally Looking Up Down Under

In case you missed the screams, it's now Australia's turn on the rack. The country's bulk wine industry—the very force that powered Australia to its status as the world's fourth largest wine exporter (after France, Italy and Spain)—is reeling. It's made newspaper headlines everywhere Australian wines are sold.

What's happening is news. It was also news when, earlier in this decade, Australian wines battered the bejeezus out of Bordeaux in the British market. The Aussies exulted. And it was news when Australian wine exports tripled in the last decade. Cue the Aussie exultation.

Who could blame them? There was triumphant talk about “Brand Australia,” which called to mind a socialist realism poster of Australian winemakers marching arm in arm into a bright future.

But “Brand Australia,” which was promoted by the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation, the national agency that authorizes wines for export, served only the big boys. The small wineries got shoved aside at the trough. Many of the smaller Aussie winery owners I've talked to are bitter about this.

There was, of course, only one problem with that vision: It was a race to the bottom, as commodity wine sales always are. “Brand Australia” was paradoxically a great success and a dead end.

The fall was hardly surprising. Only the suddenness of it was. Analysts have for several years now pointed to Australia's increasing oversupply of grapes for bulk wines. Prices kept getting slashed in exchange for market share. The average price of a liter of exported Australian wine today is 25 percent lower than it was 10 years ago. That sort of thing works for electronics, but not for wine grapes.

Of course, boom and bust is an old story in agricultural economics. But that's not the story here. If it were that simple, it would be merely painful, but not game-changing. Instead, something more fundamental is broken, namely, Australia's long dominant but increasingly inappropriate bulk wine culture.

When I was living in Australia in 2007 (and I've returned twice since then) I noted this in a column filed from Melbourne:

“For too long, Australia's wine culture—and its vocabulary—has been dominated by the commercial interests of their giant wine corporations. They're all about blending wines across regions and devising an eye-glazing number of branded wines of no

real character. They have suppressed a culture of place because it's antithetical to their interests.”

I mention this not to engage in journalistic thorax thumping but to point out that Australia's wine industry was always lopsided. Australia has thousands of small family wineries. But its wine culture was dominated—bullied even—by the bulk-wine mentality of its mega-corporations. Their interests did not align with a fine wine mentality, the window dressing of a few high-end showcase wines from the big boys notwithstanding.

What the “Australian wine gone bust” newspaper stories fail to elucidate is that Australian wine really is composed of dozens of distinctive wine districts whose voices have been muffled by the country's traditional preference for blending.

It was also muffled by an outdated “show” system of regional and national wine judgments meant to improve Australia's wines. Back in the 1970s and '80s it surely did that. But for too many years now it has served to endorse and promote not Australia's most distinctive, individualistic wines but rather its most mainstream, commercial ones.

In the next decade we will be hearing about—and seeing—a new articulation of Australian wine based on an old-fashioned emphasis on place-specificity. This is what happened in California starting in the 1980s.

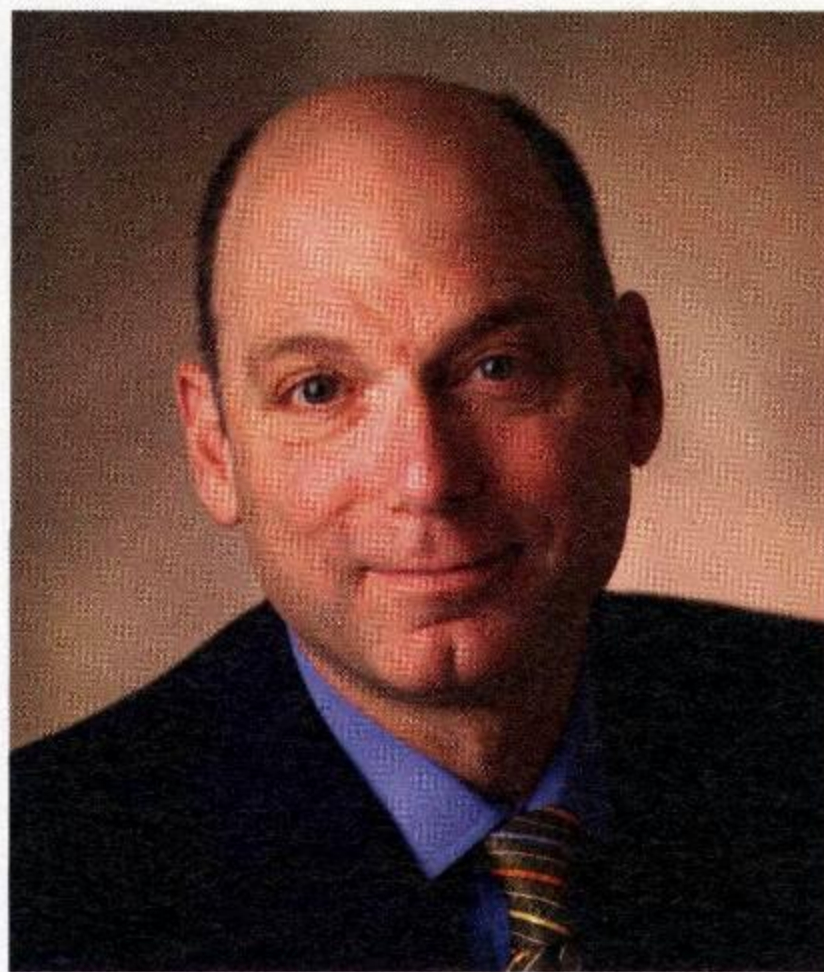
Australia already has the wineries and vineyards in place. But only when you go there do you discover just how vibrant and varied Australia's wines really are.

For the Aussies, it's a matter of recalibrating an old wine culture—which is easier said than done, of course. But it is happening. And it's the Aussies themselves who are doing it, not outside agitators such as, ahem, American wine writers.

Eventually, you'll see it for yourself in a store near you. But it won't arrive with the hard-muscle marketing of the old “critter wines.” Instead, it will be more of a slow, steady seduction, one Clare Valley Riesling, Hunter Valley Sémillon and Mornington Peninsula Pinot Noir at a time.

This is how it worked with Italian wines 30 years ago, California wines 20 years ago and Spanish wines 10 years ago. Soon it will be Australia's turn. The critter wines are roadkill. And it's about time, too.

*Matt Kramer has contributed to Wine Spectator regularly since 1985.*



**“BRAND AUSTRALIA” SERVED ONLY THE BIG BOYS. SMALL WINERIES GOT SHOVED ASIDE AT THE TROUGH.**