

People's Palate by Rich Mauro

WINE/FOOD/TRAVEL

<http://peoplespalate.blogspot.com/2009/09/understanding-hunter-valley-semillon.html>

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### UNDERSTANDING HUNTER VALLEY SEMILLON

Semillon "is one of the unsung heroes of white wine production."

So it says in the definitive Oxford Companion to Wine.

Unsung presumably because although the grape is widely cultivated, there are very few places where it produces wines of distinction. But where it does those wines can be glorious. The most notable of these are the great dessert wines of Sauternes in which Semillon is the leading component (blended with sauvignon blanc) lending a plump, fleshy quality, butterscotch, lanolin and aging potential. Somewhat less so are the fine dry whites of Graves (also

blended with sauvignon). Typically these wines are oaky, creamy and rich, with nutty, honey, and melon. Most everywhere else Semillon is an afterthought, a minor blending component or occasionally an unremarkable varietal wine.

The most notable exception is the Hunter Valley of Australia, a region about 2 hours north of Sydney that enjoys the distinction of being the location of the first vineyards planted in Australia (1830). I recently had a chance to experience the uniqueness of Hunter Valley Semillon as I tasted three recent releases from Brokenwood Wines, a 40 year old winery that has become an icon in the valley. Founded in 1970 by Tony Albert, John Beeston and James Halliday (AKA Australia's leading wine critic), Brokenwood has evolved into one of Australia's benchmark wineries. Iain Riggs, winemaker since 1982, crafts not only some of the Hunter Valley's most prized Semillons but also one of Australia's most iconic single vineyard wines, the Graveyard Shiraz.



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As these wines demonstrated, there is something about the combination of sandy, loamy, clay soils, high humidity, hot but wet summers, and dry winters there that create a hospitable environment for a style of Semillon that is austere and delicate when young. But, thanks to the high acidity, have a rare ability to age (some reportedly as long as twenty plus years) into wines with a wondrous richness and complexity.

For those used to soft, fruity, sweetish whites, these wines may be a little difficult to comprehend. They are made without oak, are quite bracing, and sport refreshingly low alcohol (10-11%), perfect as an aperitif or with delicate seafood dishes. But, after five, ten, or more years, they develop into luscious wines of notably different character, suitable for richer dishes. Brokenwood's 2008 Hunter Valley Semillon (10%, \$20) is typical of the young style: pale, citrusy and austere. The aroma is a bit muted, though there are hints of racy lime, lemongrass and smoky herb with a suggestion of mineral. It is refreshingly spirited in the mouth with lively acidity and light spice in the finish.



It's fun to drink now but it should evolve nicely five more years. The 2005 Brycefield Belford Vineyards (11%, \$32) gives hints to what happens as Hunter Valley Semillon ages. The aroma has broadened, showing citrus, fig, tangerine and butterscotch, along with grassy and mineral (talc?) notes. The palate is still extremely lively with more tangerine, citrus and some spice. The texture has rounded and filled out. Will evolve for several more years.

The epitome of Brokenwood Semillon is the 2003 ILR Reserve (11.5%, \$45). The colour is golden. The aromas display toast, honey, and almond notes. The palate enters with lively acidity, lemon, lime melon mineral and herb laced through a rich texture. As good as this in now, one senses even more pleasures yet to come. These Hunter Valley Semillons are great wines in the making, if you have the patience to wait for them.

Who says white wine can't age?!

