



Canberra's reputation grows as cool climate wine champion

Canberra's not just a place of politics. The region's growing reputation for fine cool climate wines is attracting plenty of attention to the area as well, writes Christine Salins.

Next month, a symposium will be held at University House in Canberra celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Canberra District wine region.

When pioneering vignerons John Kirk (Clonakilla) and Edgar Riek (Lake George) planted grapes back in 1971, Canberra was better known for its political intrigue than it was for winemaking. No-one could have foreseen just how highly regarded the region would become as a producer of fine cool-climate wines.

A number of wineries have been quietly kicking goals for years, but there's been a real coming of age in the last two or three years, with one Canberra wine, Clonakilla Shiraz Viongier, elevated to icon status, and some young bloods injecting a new enthusiasm into the industry.

Just recently, Alex McKay won a trophy at the Sydney Wine Show for his Collector Wines 2009 Marked Tree Shiraz. A 2009 Shiraz from another newcomer, Nick O'Leary, won the trophy for Best Young Shiraz in the NSW Wine Awards in October.

Earlier, Nick Spencer, of Eden Road Wines, had stunned everyone when he took out the 2009 Jimmy Watson trophy at the Melbourne Wine Show. The 2008 Long Road Shiraz was made from Hilltops grapes at the Eden Road winery, located in the formerly Hardys-owned Kamberra winery right on the main highway leading into the nation's capital.

Suddenly a name that most people had not even heard of was on everyone's lips. "It was a really good way of picking up both consumer and trade awareness," said Spencer, who is president of the Canberra District Wine Industry Association.

Spencer has so much faith in the region that he recently released a premium wine labelled simply "Canberra". It's a 2009 Shiraz but that's not apparent from the label. "The idea is to promote that we think Canberra is among the best place in the world to grow Shiraz," Spencer said.

Despite making only a small volume, he has already succeeded in getting it into some of the best restaurants in Sydney and Melbourne.

A string of successes for Canberra wines on the show circuit have been complemented by a huge number of reviews and acco-



Benchmark: Clonakilla's shiraz viognier

'When you compare the Canberra, region with just 35 wineries, to the Hunter Valley, which has more than 150, it really is an outstanding result.'

lades, and now sommeliers everywhere are seeking out Canberra wines for their lists.

"You can see the tide is turning where people are ringing us to buy the wine, instead of us having to do cold calling," said Jennie Mooney, of Capital Wines, who is building a cellar door near the hugely successful Grazing restaurant to create one big food, wine and tourism complex.

The wines in Capital's core range, the Ministry series, have quirky names such as Back-

bencher Merlot and the Foreign Minister Sangiovese, in a nod to the region's political roots. Mooney says they are selling as far afield as Western Australia, where they are struggling to keep up with demand.

The manager of Lerida Estate, Anne Caine, said Canberra wines have become the flavour of the month. She said it was "extraordinary" that of the 32 wineries with cellar doors in Canberra, 10 had been awarded five-star status by James Halliday. This was probably the highest, proportionally, of any region in Australia.

In Halliday's Top 100 NSW Wines, 19 Canberra District wines made the list, equalled only by the Hunter Valley, which also had 19. "When you compare Canberra, with just 35 wineries, to the Hunter Valley, which has more than 150, it really is an outstanding result," Caine said.

"And in addition to the 19 wines which were made in Canberra, there were also three wines ... that are produced using Canberra District fruit. This is one of the up and coming regions, not just in NSW but in Australia. There's a real recognition in Canberra compared with five years ago."

The district's success has been primarily on the back of Shiraz and Riesling, with Helm Wines in particular doing outstandingly well with its Riesling and Premium Riesling. Its wines feature on lists such as Aria, Bathers Pavilion, Rockpool Bar and Grill, Tersuyas, Otto and Quay in Sydney, and Bistro Thierry in Melbourne.

But Caine said other varieties are doing well. One of Lerida's most popular wines is a Botrytis Pinot Gris and it makes several excellent examples of Pinot, its Cullerin Pinot on the list at Time to Vino in Sydney and its Shiraz Viognier on the list at Windows and The Livingroom in Melbourne.

Fergus McGhie, of Mount Majura Vineyard, said Australian Capital Tourism's Liquid Geography campaign had put the spotlight on Canberra as a producer of top Shiraz and Riesling. "I think we're selling that story pretty well," McGhie said.

"But there's some exciting stuff going on outside of Shiraz and Riesling."

Mount Majura Tempranillo has been picked up by restaurants such as Movida Aqui in Melbourne and Bird Cow Fish in Sydney, while its TSG blend of Tempranillo,



Shiraz and Graciano is on the list at Cotton Duck in Sydney.

McGhie said it's an exciting time for Canberra wineries, with even previously unenthusiastic locals now embracing the wines. He has noticed a major shift in the last year or two. For many years, it had been easier to find Canberra wines on Sydney and Melbourne restaurant lists than in those in Canberra itself.

Lark Hill has been overwhelmed with support for its Grüner Veltliner since it produced Australia's first example of the variety in 2009. Winemaker Chris Carpenter attributes its success partly to curiosity, partly to the vineyard's biodynamic certification and partly to the fact that sommeliers have found it to be a great wine to match with food.

The 2010 Grüner Veltliner was pre-ordered by restaurants after sommeliers were offered a barrel tasting, and many re-ordered above their initial allocation. Restaurants such as Aria and Fix St James have picked it up, while Coast lists the Lark Hill Chardon-

nay and Fix St James also takes the Lark Hill Shiraz Viognier.

Tim Kirk, whose Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier has become a benchmark for the style in Australia, says there is a real interest in Canberra wine now, both at wine shows and at a consumer level. There had been a noticeable increase in interest in Canberra Shiraz in the last two or three years, and Canberra Riesling had also picked up a lot of momentum. "We make 10,000 cases of wine and we just cannot keep up with demand," Kirk said.

He attributes the region's success to the fact that it makes a medium-bodied, spicy, savoury Shiraz, the sort that people can enjoy with their dinner.

Alex McKay said Kirk is making a wine that's "almost a Burgundy for Shiraz lovers". He said Canberra's combination of cool climate and granite and shale soils produces medium-bodied wines with elegance and spice, yet with plenty of interest and complexity. It was a style that today's consumers found appealing, he said.

"The market is coming to drink more of those styles of wines," McKay said. "Part of the success of Canberra wines is not only that the wines have gotten better but the market is moving to that sort of style."



Canberra region wines make their mark