

Real Wine *in the land of* Vivid Sunshine



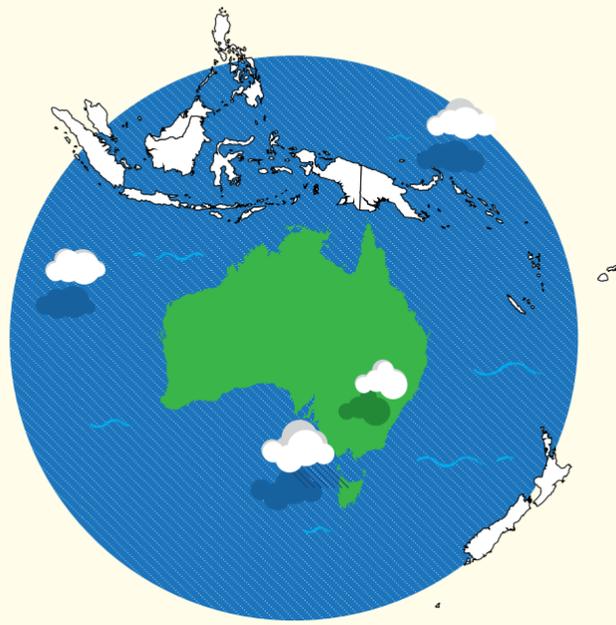
This year, renowned author and wine journalist Alice Feiring visited Australia for the first time in her career. Feiring's account of her trip provides a colourful, beautiful and frank view of the new frontier in Australian wine.

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Author
Alice Feiring

I was halfway around the world, sitting on a panel entitled *Truth and Love in Wine* when I blurted out, "Stop!" I stared into my glass. I had just tasted something shocking: a riveting Australian syrah—a *Bobar* wine made by Sally and Tom Belford in the Yarra Valley. Like the ones I love from the Northern Rhône, this syrah was whole cluster, from vineyards inching towards organic—spicy and lively. Sublimely minimalist, the wine showed me that a revolution had indeed touched down within the Australian industry. Hallelujah, it was a long time coming.

Those looking for real wine have often made Australian wines the butt of jokes that went way beyond Monty Python's 1970s iconic skit (which similarly trashes them). By the late 1980s, the huge continent became known, at least from my perch in the United States, as the land of "*frankenwines*", replete with market-driven examples reliant on animal labels, designer yeasts, super enzymes, powdered and liquid additives, high-powered machines and industrial farming. The spirited country between the Indian and Atlantic oceans might not have invented such tricks but they certainly perfected them. The overarching styles they strove for were massive, confectioned and highly alcoholic. Some growers were sincere and showed commitment to work in another way: dry-farmed and biodynamic, such as the now old-timers Castagna, Jasper Hill and Sorrenberg. However, mostly critics—like Robert M. Parker Jnr—loved what I couldn't abide. That was the very reason it took so long for me to consider taking the long flight over from New York. There just wasn't enough going on down under for me to care.

It was only a matter of time before a change occurred in the country that planted its first vine in 1788. After the "dark ages" a shift started to rumble; it was sometime around 2009. That's when natural wine imports from Europe started to enter the country. A younger generation travelled and drank with other winemakers. Many of those coming of age were pained over the plonky reputation their country had developed. Something had to be done. A few conspired. In 2010, one conspirator—Tom Shobbrook—ended up in my living room, giving me a taste of his and his mate's wines. An attention-getting *sémillon* was poured from a ceramic egg. "This is *Aust-ralia*?" I said, trying to wrap my tongue around that wild *sémillon* and some brilliant pinots from a winemaker I had never heard of (Anton von Klopper and his *Domaine Lucci*). The wines I tasted were part of a tale that is sure to be historic.



Other like-minded Australian producers worth seeking out:

Avani Mornington Peninsula, Victoria

Ngeringa Adelaide Hills, South Australia

Sutton Grange Bendigo, Victoria

Cobaw Ridge Macedon, Victoria

Ochota Barrels Adelaide, South Australia

It began when the late Sam Hughes, the lanky James Erskine (at the time a sommelier, now owner of Jauma wines), the chaotic genius Anton von Klopper (Domaine Lucci and Lucy Margaux) and the practical and talented Tom Shobbrook (Shobbrook wines) had a big fat idea. They would create these 900-litre glistening ceramic eggs, ferment wine in them, plant them in different soils and then think, yell, sing and play music to the vessels. The point? Did the wines respond to different dirt and emotion? As the late Hughes said in an interview I once read, the *Natural Selection Theory* (as the foursome collectively called themselves, their practices and their wines) was “more of an art project than a wine.” The only additives utilised by the winemaking group were music and word. Made from an iconic Australian grape—sémillon—the project captured awards and media attention. In a matter of three years, the scene had changed; it was set for rebellion. A few weeks after the death of Hughes in 2013, the *new* Australians had a platform. *Rootstock* was born. The second edition of that natural wine fair was the compelling reason I overcame my fears and made the long intercontinental journey. For the first time since I began writing about wine for a living, there would be more than a handful of people to meet and many wines to taste—even more than I had tasted in my tenement living room.

Set in an old industrial carriage house, *Rootstock* was a hoot. The event was conceived and executed by wine importer Giorgio De Maria and some special friends; it resulted in an intense protest march of an occasion that brought European natural wines and their “new” Australian counterparts together. However, not all were as pleased as I was. *Wine Australia* did not support this major tasting, dismissing the notion of *natural* as a passing fad. They cited Robert M. Parker Jnr, who had called the natural wine movement a hoax, as their role model for derision. To each their own. *Wine Australia* lost out. *Rootstock*, with over 13,000 visitors bursting through its gates, brought a vitality to the Australian wine scene that had almost been lost.

I hadn’t come so far just to sit on panels and passively discover wine. The day after the festival shuttered, I took off, heading for three different regions: boarding five flights in eight days. I admit to a terrible meltdown when I saw the distance and time differences I was to endure but looking back, it was all worth it. I had to answer that big question: did wine terroir exist in this exotic land with particularly vivid sunshine, threatening summer fires, marsupials, pythons, strange frogs and cute koalas?

Of course it does. With fabulously varied soils—grape-loving basalt, granite and limestone—and cool climate spots with an array of elevations, how could it not? However, I wasn’t alone in questioning how many old-time producers were bothering to explore the possibilities at their feet.

In addition to some great diehards of the faith, there was a whole new crop of vintners popping up. There were signs of life even in the remote Margaret River.

Being under the influence of the Indian Ocean, the region’s identity is still in formation. Beyond the same old Bordeaux-styled wines are fresh ones with a salty Indian Ocean intrigue. The current risk takers to watch are Sarah Morris and Iwo Jakimowicz of Si Vintners and Ben Gould of Blind Corner. These nonconformists all trained as conventional winemakers until they stumbled on a new world that made more sense. Morris and Jakimowicz were already headed in that direction when, while working in Spain, they found real minimalist winemaking. For Gould, the foundation changed when he visited the French biodynamic guru Nicolas Joly in the Loire. “I had come from a very straight winemaking background,” he said. “Joly’s vineyards, winemaking and wine really blew my mind. When we got back from that trip to start our own place, we had no money and the GFC was in full swing, so we couldn’t afford the tannins and yeasts. However, gaining knowledge from Joly, having no money and being a contrary person all merged together.” Gould decided he was going to go it naturally. “Many colleagues said I couldn’t do it, that I was crazy ... that just made me want to do it more.”

There’s more of this core group of like-minded folk creeping east. It was there, outside Melbourne with the smell of the bush burning, that I sat on a hill in the Victorian region of the Yarra Valley—not far from where the Bobar wines are made—talking and tasting with Patrick Sullivan. Sullivan is emblematic of the new generation set on planting, farming and making wine where the grapes should grow instead of simply where is convenient.

In his shorts and wellies, the 28-year-old with unkempt hair looked like his mother had just woken him up from a nap. A wine school drop out, he “wasn’t going to need anything they were going to teach.” Instead, he opted to further his studies in botany. While his passion for plants and viticulture is apparent, Sullivan presently has to buy his grapes ... but he *is* going to buy land and was specifically looking for a property perfectly suited to his desires: to plant own-rooted vines and not irrigate. Serious about his quest, Sullivan was camped out on a potential plot with his girlfriend when I visited. Not trusting that the soil contained limestone as he was promised, he got up at dawn to dig down into the earth in quiet, only to find that he was lied to. His search is still on.

Being an Australian vigneron is what matters to Sullivan and if he can’t supply his own grapes, he’ll convince farmers to go organic so he can purchase with confidence. His inspiration comes from outside the wine world rather than within. Once again, it was travel that made his difference. Touring through Japan, he tuned into the minerality and purity that comes from only the freshest mineral water—straight from the mountains. He wants to make something “not tasted with the tongue or smelled with the nose but which provides comfort and relaxation.” To underline this point, he brought out a bottle of water, poured me a glass and said, “*This* is my terroir.”

It was only after my long clear drink that he let me taste his *Jumpin’ Juice*—both a white and a red wine in one. The white portion is made from a blend of white grapes with skin contact. While it gets a whopping 30 days on skins, the red part—pinot noir—only receives a modest three. The result is just what he wanted. “It’s all about trying to make a red with the structure of a white,” he told me. “If you want to go dancing, you usually drink a glass of white wine or champagne, as they tend to have a little more nervous energy.”

“Did the guys from *Natural Selection Theory* influence you?” I asked. “They changed wine in this country in such a meaningful way,” he replied. “They put fun and creativity back into an industry that was a little stagnant and lifeless. They certainly built a platform on which the rest of us can build and jump from.”

Fun and creativity was indeed the gift of the *Natural Selection Theory*. While the project no longer exists, the survivors are making beautiful wines—blending philosophy and thought into their serious work. Oh, sure, it was possible to dismiss Anton von Klopper as a poetic madman: when I saw him pogoing with Sullivan on the dance floor at *Rootstock*, experiencing the moment in play and passion, I understood that inclination. One could even raise an eyebrow when looking at the mess of vines, which he subsequently bottles. The other eyebrow might possibly arch when opening the door to look into his chaotic winery ... but to listen to him talk of dry farming, see him make pasta from scratch and press espresso flawlessly: that was all it took for me to understand that this vigneron’s particular blend of mindfulness, accuracy and creativity will continue to thrill and push boundaries. Of his mindset, von Klopper explains: “Most people that cook look at food to find out how much they can do to it. Many are doing the same thing with wine. I want to see how little I can do. That’s where the greatness is.”

Thus, despite the efforts of the wine bureaucracy to hold them back, Australia debuts into the natural wine world, not with just a few voices but with a small and rare chorus. I could see that as I drove through the Barossa, past acres of industrial farming, past ancient vines that had survived phylloxera only to be hooked up to irrigation pipes that made them look sad and droopy. Tom Shobbrook was giving me the tour of the land before taking me to his family’s vineyard. Shobbrook is also looking for land—not far from that of von Klopper, over the border in the Adelaide Hills—where he can grow vines the way he wants to. However, for the meantime, he can’t go too crazy with what he makes under his family name ... though he has convinced them to let him have his way with the wines: no adds except for sulfur, perhaps at a level a little higher than when he crafts his own. With wine fermenting all around us in his shed, the glow of *Rootstock* enhanced his golden aura. Shobbrook was full of the thrill of having seen the crowd embrace what they had previously said couldn’t be done: real wine in Australia. The marketing board from the sunburnt country can go ahead and ignore the change but the fact is, as Shobbrook said, “we did what we set out to do, we changed Australia.”

And so they did. **A**