

A photograph of a rock climber scaling a steep, grey rock face. The climber is wearing a harness and a helmet, and is secured by a green rope. The background shows a cloudy sky and distant mountains.

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TradeSmart outlines the main players



# ON THE GRAPEVINE

Knowing what wine is what can be bewildering. Here, *TradeSmart* outlines the main players. *By Winsor Dobbins*





There are over a hundred grape varieties used for making wine around the world, but a dozen or so are firm favourites.

Here's what you can expect when you open a bottle of your preferred style.

## WHITES

**Chardonnay:** The classic white grape variety from Burgundy in France, used to produce wines including the great white Burgundies such as Chablis. It is also one of three varieties used to produce Champagne. First planted in Australia only 35 years ago, it is now our favourite white. It is made in a variety of styles, usually full-bodied, and features stone fruit flavours. It is often given some oak treatment to add complexity. Unoaked styles should be drunk young. Try wines like Cullen and Leeuwin Estate from Western Australia or Coldstream Hills from the Yarra Valley.

**Sauvignon Blanc:** Originally from the Loire Valley in France – where it produces the very minerally Sancerres – sauvignon blanc has proved a huge success in New Zealand and in cooler parts of Australia, particularly the Adelaide Hills (try Shaw and Smith). It is often very acidic and can have either tropical fruit flavours (from warmer regions) or intense herbaceousness or grassiness. Usually unoaked, it is a grape variety people either love or hate.

**Semillon:** Used in Bordeaux to make dry white blends and sweet dessert wines known as 'stickies'. In Australia it shows at its best in the Hunter Valley, where it produces lovely citrus characters when young and then develops honeyed, toasty characters as it matures. Often blended with sauvignon blanc, particularly in Western Australia, to produce fresh, zesty wines known as Classic Dry Whites, made for drinking in their youth. Classic Hunter names include McWilliam's Mount Pleasant and Tyrrell's.

**Riesling:** A variety that starts in Germany, Austria and Alsace in France and has gained a widespread following for its lively lemon/lime characters and biting, steely acidity, making it a perfect partner for spicy Asian dishes. Nearly all Australian-bottled

rieslings are now made in a bone-dry style and the best come from the Clare and Eden Valleys (try 2006 varieties from Jeanneret, Neagles Rock and Knappstein). Some excellent off-dry rieslings are imported from New Zealand.

**Verdelho:** This grape was originally used on the island of Madeira to make intensely flavoured fortified wine. It has become popular in Australia, where it is made without oak, because it is fresh and fruity when young and a very good partner for a variety of cuisines. Should be drunk within 18 months of release to be enjoyed at its soft, dry best. Try the 2006 Wandin Valley Verdelho.

**Pinot gris/pinot grigio:** A grape that is made in different styles in Alsace (gris), where it is often pungent powerful, and Italy (grigio) where it is fresh and fruity. Australian wines normally fall between the two and the best wines made from this variety are attractively dry and food friendly.





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oxw] Vineyards in the Hunter Valley, NSW  
posite page) In the cellars, above; and  
w, Darren De Bortoli of De Bortoli Wines  
vious page) Spring vineyards with blue sky

Gewürztraminer: From Alsace and the Rhine, this pungent spicy/smoky grape has never really taken off in Australia, largely because it is made in a variety of styles. Most of the wines are off-dry or slightly sweet with lychee and rose petal characters. Popular with Chinese dishes, but not always a success.

Other white varieties include the following: Viognier, a spicy, aromatic grape with peach and apricot flavours from the Rhône region of France that is growing in popularity thanks largely to the efforts of South Australia's Yalumba, and is often used in blends; chenin blanc, crisp with simple apple flavours and a variety that has fallen out of favour; and marsanne, a minor variety in the Rhône Valley that has thrived in Central Victoria,

where Chateau Tahbilk has the world's oldest plantings of the variety.

#### REDS

Shiraz: Originally from Persia, now Iran, and sometimes called 'syrah', shiraz is the great wine of the Rhône Valley, where it is used in Hermitage, Côte Rôtie and other classic reds. Often aggressive in its youth, it has dark berry and pepper spice characters when seen at its best. Thrives in the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale with more restrained examples coming from Victoria and the Hunter, the grape used to make our greatest reds – Penfolds Grange and Henschke Hill of Grace.

Pinot Noir: The classic red grape wine from Burgundy and also a component of Champagne.





The best Australian examples come from cool-climate regions including Tasmania, the Yarra Valley, Geelong and the Mornington Peninsula, and show raspberry and cherry flavours, earthiness and gamey characters as they develop, as well as wonderful textures. The best examples, Bass Phillip and Curlewis, are expensive, but not as expensive as the real thing from Burgundy.

**Cabernet Sauvignon:** The key grape in the vast majority of the great reds from Bordeaux and what the English call 'claret'. At its best, cabernet will show blackberry/blackcurrant flavours along with chocolate, mint and a smorgasbord of other possibilities. The best are given judicious oak treatment and can be extremely long lived if cellared well. Australia's best examples come from the Margaret River and Coonawarra.

**Merlot:** The second great red grape of Bordeaux, often blended with cabernet, it can be fragrant and plummy. Here in Australia far too many merlots are weak or insipid, or taste like poor cabernet impersonations. At its best (try the Peter Lehmann 2004 Merlot), merlot has some lovely berry flavours and is soft and smooth on the palate. At its worst it is worth avoiding.

Other red varieties include sangiovese and nebbiolo, Italian varieties that have proved a huge success in the King Valley of Victoria among other places; grenache, now largely used in fortified wines and in blends; durif and cabernet franc, also largely used in blends. ■



## DRYING UP

The 2007 vintage across Australia has been hit by drought and unusually vicious frosts, meaning production will be down by around 20 per cent.

While that is bad news for grape growers and small producers, it could also provide the industry with a major boost by reducing a massive oversupply, known as a 'wine lake'. "It'll be tough in the short-term for grape growers and wineries, but in the long-term the drought has done the industry a favour," says Darren De Bortoli, Managing Director of De Bortoli Wines. "As the industry liquidates stock, so prices will rise."

De Bortoli says consumers have been getting 'fantastic bargains' over the past three years thanks to oversupply, but should prepare themselves for some 'quite dramatic' price increases later this year as stocks diminish.

Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation spokesman Lawrie Stanford said the weather conditions would lead to a 20 per cent volume reduction in the 2007 harvest, which could lead to the glut being wiped out by 20 – two years earlier than expected.

Constellation Brands, which owns BRL Hardy among other iconic Australian brands, said its production would be down by up to 20 per cent for 2007.

Not all regions have been badly hit, however, with the Hunter Valley escaping virtually unscathed. The harvest commenced in January – earlier than usual – and Poole Rock chief winemaker, Patrick Auld, says: "The drought has resulted in lower yields than normal but the signs are there for a high-quality vintage."