

WINE



DISTANT DROPS

A growing number of Australian winemakers are treading grapes in European vineyards and bringing home the products

Max Allen

ONE day in early 2009, South Australian winemaker Rose Kentish gathered her husband and four children together for a family meeting and informed them they were moving to Provence. She had schoolgirl French. She only knew one person in France. But she had a dream: she wanted to make the pale, dry style of pink wine for which Provence was famous.

So off they went. And stayed for nine months. And the dream came true: Kentish not only managed to find a winery in Provence that would sell this upstart Australian some grapes, she also linked up with another winery on Corsica and produced a white from the vermentinu variety. And a few months later, the first shipment of her European wines arrived back home.

Australian winemakers have been travelling to Europe for decades, of course. But mostly it's been to gain valuable winery experience working during the northern hemisphere vintage, or to earn money working for large companies making cheapish plonk for British supermarkets. Kentish is part of a new breed of winemakers: Aussies immersing themselves in European wine culture to produce small quantities of wine to sell back home under their own label.

Kentish has returned every year since (her 2012 vintage white and rose have just landed here), and as well as

achieving her ambition, says she's learned something else from the adventure — which has, she's the first to admit, costs rather a lot of time and money.

"Why do I it?" she asks. "I'll tell you. To remember why I'm making wine in the first place..."

"On Corsica there's an authentic food and wine dimension that's tied up with family and the natural rhythms of life. When I do vintage there, we'll work 18 to 20-hour days but we've stopped in the middle to have a lunch of oysters under a tree with the pickers and a dram of vermentinu, and then they've unfolded their hammocks and curled up in the shade. I try and bring that sensibility back to vintage in McLaren Vale."

She is not alone. As well as making his Syrahmi Shiraz in Heathcote, Victorian Adam Foster has released an old-vine grenache called L'imposteur that he made in the south of France. Joe Grilli of McLaren Vale winery Primo Estate has made white wine in the Veneto and red wine in Tuscany and sells here under the Primo & Co label. And two of the Yarra Valley's top winemakers, Timo Mayer and Mac Forbes, have both produced rieslings in Austria.

Dave Fletcher specialises in making red nebbiolo wines from Victorian and South Australian vineyards. But in 2009 he also made a nebbiolo from one of the top

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Clockwise from main picture: Don Lewis and Narelle King in their vineyard at Nagambie in Victoria; Dave Fletcher in an Italian vineyard; and Joe Grilli in the barrel room at McLaren Vale's Primo Estate in South Australia; and Yarra Valley winemaker Andrew Marks, creator of The Wanderer Wines

vineyards in Barbaresco, in northwest Italy, and sells that wine here under his own label. What did that experience teach him?

"That good prosciutto and reggiano are essential to winemaking," he says with a laugh. "No, I guess the main thing is that it has allowed me to develop enough knowledge of the variety to guide the wines that I make (in Australia) in their own direction — which is a direction of low-impact winemaking with a focus on expression of terroir — and not try to make the wines look European."

Spain is a particularly popular destination for travelling Australian grape-treaders. Victorian winemaking partners Don Lewis and Narelle King have produced a red wine from Priorat under their Tar & Roses label since 2004. For the past five years, Belinda Thomson, winemaker at Crawford River in western Victoria, has spent each vintage making white wine from old-vine verdejo grape in Rueda, and has just shipped some of this wine to Australia. And Margaret River-based winemaking couple Sarah Morris and Iwo Jakimowicz have even gone the extra step of buying their own ancient grenache vineyard in Calatayud, in northeast Spain.

For Yarra Valley winemaker Andrew Marks, the main attraction of Spain is these old, unirrigated, low-yielding vineyards — ancient sites such as the one near Barcelona he's been harvesting for his own wine, El Wanderer, since 2008.

"I arrive in late September each year and within a couple of days I'm picking grapes from those amazing old vines," says Marks.

"One of the reasons I started doing this is because when I first worked in the region in 2005 as a consultant winemaker the locals seemed more interested in newer, international varieties like cabernet. But they had these amazing old vineyards of carignan and grenache. So I started making wine from these old sites partly to show them how good their own vineyards could be. Which has also made me appreciate how unique our pinot noir vineyards are back home."

So, what now for Rose Kentish? With a couple of vintages of Corsican white and red and a Provence rose under her belt, more dreams are formulating.

"I'd like to make a champagne," she says, quietly.

"In Champagne. That'll be a challenge. But I'm not shy of trying things, even if warning bells are going off. A lot of people say, 'I'd love to do what you've done — but I can't.' I must lack the DNA that says, 'I can't.'"

TASTING NOTES: EUROPEAN REDS, AUSTRALIAN-MADE

2011 Ulithorne Immortelle, Corsica \$35

Rose Kentish has blended three local Corsican varieties, nielluccio, minustello and corcajolo nero (no, I'd never heard of them before, either) and that southern French stalwart, syrah, to make this rustic red, full of dry, Mediterranean flavours: wild herbs, chewy little red berries and hints of roasted-coffee-like character. ulithorne.com.au



2010 El Wanderer Carinyena, Alt Emporda \$55

Made from a single patch of low-yielding carignan vines planted in 1908, this is an excellent example of how delicious this often underrated variety can be: heaps of impenetrable black fruit, meaty, chewy tannins and a distinctive sweet-savoury perfume like rich, old-fashioned pipetobacco. wandererwines.com

2009 Fletcher Barbaresco, Piedmont \$70

A triumph of terroir: Dave Fletcher made this nebbiolo from the Barbaresco region of Piedmont the same way he makes nebbiolo in Australia (without doing very much in the cellar), and yet it tastes so different — and unmistakably of where it's from: gorgeous perfume of sweet leather and red flowers; deeply, deeply savoury and satisfying. fletcherwines.com

