



SHIRAZ IS THE ONLY GRAPE GROWN AT GLENFION IN CANYONLEIGH.

THE SPICE ROUTE HISTORICALLY REFERS TO THE TRADE between Asia, northeast Africa and Europe, when spices were at the heart of ancient world commerce, but I like to borrow the term for Australian shiraz, because there is a quiet revolution occurring in the way our winemakers produce this favoured varietal.

I say favoured because if you scratch an Australian wine drinker they bleed shiraz. The variety lies at the heart of local red wines in a way rarely seen in other countries. There seems to be a symbiosis between our earthy landscape, easygoing people and a wine variety with ripe, rich dark fruit flavours, high alcohol and soft tannins.

Our oldest shiraz vines date back almost two centuries. Some wine growing families can talk of vines planted by grandfathers and great-grandfathers; the Hoffmans and Kalleskes in the Barossa, the Redmans in Coonawarra and the Potts family in Langhorne Creek can all point to multi-generational plantings.

The variety works well in Australia because of the synthesis of our soils and location. Our country has latitudes that suit varieties with low water requirements and a toleration for drought, strong wind and bright sunshine. Shiraz responds with a willingness. Depending on the location, its flavours run from charcuterie, smoked meats and ginger, into pepper, cinnamon and nutmeg, through to berries, plum and dark chocolate and finally, date and prune.

The most cutting-edge styles with spice intensity are coming from Australia's coolest regions such as Tasmania's Tamar Valley. The new spice route in shiraz has meant that Tasmania, the Adelaide Hills and a large swathe of NSW are leading producers. More elegant styles cluster around Orange, Hill Tops, Gundagai and Canberra. In the Southern Highlands, the Canyonleigh area, including GlenFion Vineyard, leads the way. Into Victoria, the shiraz spice route stretches from Beechworth, Heathcote, Macedon, Yarra Valley, Mornington and Geelong out to the Grampians Great Western region, where it really finds balance.

Producers are using the term syrah to denote a style of wine that is different to South Australian shiraz (the syrah and shiraz grape are the same varietal). The colour from these regions tends to mid ruby, rather than the black-hearted warmer region wines. Drink them and you will notice less black fruit richness, more red fruit freshness and smoked meat aromas and flavours. These wines are associated with the smell and taste of the essential

oils of peppercorns and culinary herbs such as basil, rosemary, marjoram, oregano and thyme; they have an overtone of cracked pepper.

Spice can also be ramped up by leaving a percentage of whole bunches in fermentation. A whole bunch means the berries are still attached to the stems. If the stems are woody brown in colour, it is possible to include them in ferments where they add spicy flavours and aromas, at the expense of colour intensity. Stems give wines an extra layer of finesse, so drinkers get to enjoy secondary characteristics such as a wider textured palate and a floral perfumed character, sometimes with a subtle peppery finish.

Contemporary Australian shiraz also shows spice as the product of co-fermentation, which essentially is the cohabitation of red and white grapes in the same tank. This isn't new. For hundreds of years shiraz and viognier have been bed partners in Cote-Rotie in France, with the apricot aromatic of viognier co-fermenting with syrah to give greater aroma and flavour complexity. Many white grapes, including Riesling in small amounts, contribute a lot more character than the actual percentage would indicate.

So what Australian producers are showing the way in modern shiraz? The image leader for most is Grange, thanks to Penfolds' leadership in multi-vineyard and regional blending, but other producers are in play. Torbreck, Runrig, Hardys, Bird In Hand and Wolf Blass all demonstrate the ability of our growers to produce grapes with different regional expressions that winemakers can fit jigsaw-like into a homogeneous picture.

Among the frontrunners in single vineyard fine shiraz are Wolf Blass's platinum label 'Medlands Estate', Torbreck's 'The Laird', Henschke's 'Hill of Grace', Clarendon Hills' 'Australis', Jim Barry's 'Armagh', Tahbilk's '1860 Vines', Bests' 'Thomson Family', Chateau Tanunda's 'The Everest' and Elderton's 'Command'. Penfolds also produces a single vineyard wine, the increasingly impressive 'Magill Estate', which comes at a more accessible price than Grange.

This all adds up to Australian shiraz drinkers being offered a wider range of flavours and styles than ever before. If old world spice traders had had our shiraz at their disposal, it would undoubtedly have added a valuable commodity to the ancient trade routes. **HL**

top drops



Langmeil 2012 The Freedom 1843 Shiraz (\$125, 94/100)

Cola and coffee aromas are complex and dignified, with violet floral, sarsaparilla, black tea and blackberry. Even, silky, creamy tannins are allied to elegant dark berry fruit length. Complex flavours, persistent fine tannins and firm oak feature in the long finish. Medium end of full bodied.



Torbreck 2010 RunRig (\$225, 94/100)

This combines a solid mineral edge with sweet blackberry fruit and flowers, the mineral side aromas showing savoury smoked meats. The voluptuous palate coats the mouth with silky soft tannins, and the chocolate blackberry fruit sails through the middle palate. Soft full finish with mineral black fruits.



Bobar 2014 Syrah (\$29, 91/100)

Picking on the cusp of ripeness shows in the colour and gives meat-stock savoury, sandalwood aromas. This style is always unoaked and is 100 per cent malolactic, aged on lees and bottled in early spring. The light medium bodied palate has silky evenness and a subtle red berry fruit. Would suit meat dishes.



Clonakilla 2013 Shiraz Viognier (\$105, 96/100)

Impeccable vineyard and winemaking etiquette. Fresh red fruit intensity and poised oak balance the aromas. The palate is ripe, even, long and medium bodied, featuring red and dark fruit flavours, capped by fine tannins which, after a few seconds, leave you admiring the proportions and elegant ripeness.



GlenFion 2014 Syrah (\$35, 92/100)

Dark cherry, black pepper and fruit aromas with tapenade, basil and spice notes. The palate strikes the right balance of medium bodied freshness. It has ripeness in the middle palate, and food friendly tannins with peppery spices to close the flavours.



Dandelion 2012 Lion's Tooth of the McLaren Shiraz Riesling (\$27.50, 92/100)

Five per cent Riesling is an unusual addition to shiraz. There is an exotic edge to the spicy shiraz aromas; floral, pure blackberry, currant and earthy. Appealing middle palate of savoury and berry fruit flavours and very fine tannins. A lick of quality oak adds flavour complexity with a firm finish.

Subscribe & enjoy Highlife today!

Visit www.highlifemagazine.com.au



for more stunning photography follow us on facebook

facebook.com/Highlifemagazinesouthernhighlands