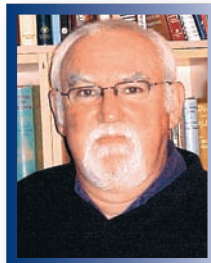


Queensland seeks to heat up its wine industry



Tony Keys

THE KEY FILES



Queensland is a hot market for wine sales, with figures on charts all pointing heavenwards. The race for retail sales dominance has escalated in the past five years with Coles and Woolworths battling for supremacy. Both supermarkets have been buying pubs as they are the key to retail sales in the State. There is a limit of three bottleshops within a 10km radius of a pub, and only the pub can own those bottleshops.

Woolworths started getting seriously involved in Queensland liquor retail in 2002, Coles the year before. In 2004 Woolworths, in partnership with the Mathieson Group, acquired the 131

Hotels, and 109 detached bottleshops belonging to Australian Leisure & Hospitality. Coles played catch-up in 2006, paying \$328 million for the 35 hotels and 102 liquor shops that formed the Hedley Hotel Group.

Queensland-based buying syndicates have been successful in bidding for many lots in the annual Coonawarra barrel auction over the past five years. Queensland is very much the buzz for retail wine sales – if it's not local residents consuming wine, then it's many hundreds of thousands of tourists enjoying an extra glass or two because they're on holiday.

According to John Hanley, Foster's Group wine specialist in Queensland, there is an increased demand for wine knowledge from both on and off-premise customers. This he attributes to a reflection of their own customers. However, there is a conundrum in Queensland, which is matched in local production. "The climate up here is a huge factor in wines you can gulp as opposed to sip," Hanley said. He points out the success of Rosemount 'O' in the State – a new release made from Muscat Gordo and White Frontignac with around 75g/L residual sugar and slightly fizzy. It is designed to be served over ice. The conundrum manifests

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Tourism-led wine is significantly contributing to the economy of the Queensland wine industry. *Photograph courtesy of Granite Belt Wine Tourism members.*

itself in production: produce wines in the accepted/traditional sense (sip) or wine to suit the market (gulp).

The burgeoning local market, combined with tourism, has been the motivation for growth in vineyards and wineries. It is also a factor in Queensland having Australia's highest number of cellar doors relative to wineries (over 90%). And it has shaped how those wineries operate. Apart from Rosemount 'O', Hanley lists lighter style reds, Rosé, and reduced alcohol wines, such as Lindemans Early Harvest and Yellowglen Jewel, as being popular in the State.

RECREATING 'BRAND QUEENSLAND'

On a visit to Queensland in January this year, I was impressed, amazed and at times disappointed in what I found. As a noted Australian wine-producing State, Queensland is way down the rankings; it's not hard to fathom why. Its sheer size makes it difficult for those not living there to grasp the geographical complexities of the State. January was the time of huge floods coming after drought – at one point 60% of the State was officially in drought while 60% was in flood! In terms relative to its size, only a small part is suitable for viticulture. True, that can also be said of other States, but Queensland also faces the problem with 'brand Queensland' which brings to mind sun, surf and beaches. Sadly, from a social angle, it also brings to mind huge alcohol problems with the indigenous community, the debacle of prohibition and Schoolies Week. Despite enormous support for the local industry, it appears the Queensland Government has great difficulty in getting its head around the issues associated with alcohol.

While on the negative, having a large market on the doorstep equates to sales. For a producer of quality wine there appears little need to go seeking recognition from other parts of the country or overseas. For a bulk producer there is the huge tourist market to feed off (or rip off?). I tasted plenty of wine while being told 'it's one made for the tourist trade – they like them sweeter'. I have no objection to simple, well-made red or white wine retaining residual sugar made to suit a particular market (e.g. Rosemount 'O'). However, I do have an objection to poor quality wine with poor sugar/acid balance being flogged as 'it's what the consumer wants'.

It would be my suggestion to any Queensland mass tourism retailer of wine masquerading as a winery to acquire a bottle of Oxford Landing 2007 Chardonnay retailing for around \$8 and discover that there is quality wine to be had below \$10.

The Queensland wine map lists 10 wine regions but only two (Granite Belt and South Burnett) hold GIs. There is a minor (legal) deception to some of the regions. Queensland licensing laws allow cellar doors to be separate from the vineyard. Therefore, a region such as the Gold Coast Hinterland, which boasts 10 wineries, only grows a small amount of grapes and mainly for show. In fact, the guys at Witches Falls Winery claim theirs is the only working winery in the region and the majority of the grapes they use come from vineyards in the Granite Belt.

Is there a question of ethics here? Should cellar doors be physically tied to the patch of dirt that houses the winery and need that winery be amongst a sea of grapes? Witches Falls Winery proprietors Jon Heslop and Richard Abraham say "it's

all about the wine”. Admittedly, they make some outstanding wine (i.e. ‘Wild Ferment’ Chardonnay 2006) and the craftsmanship from vineyard to bottle is evident. They see no problem with sourcing fruit from vineyards three hours away in Ballandean (Granite Belt) and making and selling it at their Mount Tamborine winery/cellar door only half an hour from the densely-populated Gold Coast and just an hour from the State capital, Brisbane. The fact that Mount Tamborine is itself a big tourist destination also helps.

Which leads to the question ‘when is a wine region not a wine region?’ This escalates if trying to spread Queensland wine knowledge wider. If referring to the State Government official wine map, the Gold Coast Hinterland is considered a wine region, but in effect it is not; it is a tourist destination and like all tourist destinations, has some very tacky aspects. Trying to get across the concept of a region that has hardly any grapes and only one winery could be difficult if lecturing on wine in Hong Kong or London.

QUEENSLAND TOURISM

Talking with John Penglis, proprietor of Cedar Creek Estate Winery & Vineyard, one can see the tourism angle working full steam: there is a chapel to get married in and a place to have the wedding reception in. The restaurant overlooks Wild Duck Lake, a 15ML sanctuary for native wildlife. Its glow-worm caves are renowned and doing a worthwhile environmental job. Wine can be tasted for a \$3 fee and there is a special room for larger group tastings. As a business, it’s buzzing but as a winery, it lacks authenticity. Penglis says he is some way down the track of getting the Queensland Wine Centre established there. His view is that it’s better to have it in a place where there are plenty of visitors than in a backwater like Stanthorpe up in the Granite Belt. “We have coach parties from cruise ships,” he said proudly.

In a progress report (July 2006) on the wine industry development strategy, the Queensland Government says it has successfully negotiated for more than 18 separate episodes about Queensland wine on TV lifestyle programs. The report highlights a Channel 7 profile on the Gold Coast Hinterland. Perhaps this is

the way forward – wine is part of ‘lifestyle’. Those of us more rooted in traditional wine culture have a tendency to put wine in the centre – and making lifestyle fit around it.

There is a positive side as Richard Abraham from Witches Falls Vineyard says: “People come into cellar door with a negative view of Queensland wine; not one [person] leaves with that opinion.”

Tourism-led wine has certainly worked for Sirromet and, in turn, Sirromet has taken Queensland wine to a wider audience not only in Australia, but across the world. Situated on a 2.3ha property at Mount Cotton, an easy 40-minute drive from Brisbane, Sirromet gives the impression of an authentic vineyard with several acres of grapes set in front of a fully working winery and an award-winning restaurant (Lurleens).

Adam Chapman has been with the company from the beginning in 2000. At first he was chief executive and chief winemaker, however, as the business grew he realised the combined role was too much so recently gave up the role of



Sirromet Wines produces six ranges with specials at \$50 or more, however, 80% of production is the \$13 retail range.

chief executive to Ross Elliott (ex-chief executive of Brisbane Marketing).

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The Queensland wine map lists 10 wine regions but only two (Granite Belt and South Burnett) hold GIs. Photograph courtesy of Granite Belt Wine Tourism members.

“Both wine and business were suffering,” Chapman said. Chapman appears extremely happy concentrating on the wine side. Apart from the show vineyards out in front, Sirromet has 150ha of vines at Ballandean in the Granite Belt. These now have some age and the result can be seen in the wines. Sirromet has suffered from ‘tall poppy syndrome’ and Chapman is quick to defend it. “We have environmental best practice that is first rate and we are aiming for carbon neutral; our cost of production is tightly controlled and as good as any in Australia,” he said. Chapman holds a realistic view of the wines he produces – there are six ranges with specials at \$50 or more, however, 80% of production is the \$13 retail range.

SOUTH BURNETT

Moving away from the coast, north-west of Brisbane, South Burnett is a fully-

fledged GI – home to around 25 wineries and 240ha of vines. This might look impressive if the vineyards were close together, not spread over a huge area. Take out the 175ha that Clovelly Estate owns and there’s not a great deal left. Clovelly Estate lays claim to being Queensland’s largest wine producer with 2000t passing through the winery. Deduct Sirromet and Clovelly and around 95% of Queensland producers crush less than 500t.

Top of the Clovelly range is ‘Double Pruned Shiraz’ – the vines receive their first normal prune in winter and another at the end of November forcing a second smaller crop – said to be more concentrated in flavour. They also have a full range of styles through the price spectrum.

Notwithstanding its size, Clovelly Estate has taken advantage of Queensland law and established a ‘City Cellar Door’ in the inner Brisbane suburb of Red Hill.

“We are open six days a week for wine tasting and also serve local cheese and locally-roasted coffee. By appointment we offer wine and food matching flights,” said chief executive and chief winemaker Luke Fitzpatrick.

The centre can accommodate 60 for a formal dinner or 100 for canapés. It also sells cheese, coffee and other wines from South Burnett. Clovelly also has a mobile cellar door covering the State as far north as Mossman and as far west as Mount Isa. A second was commissioned this year – to service the South East corner of the State. As much as people enjoy vineyards and wine regions, it’s Fitzpatrick’s view that they don’t like travelling more than an hour from the CBD to do so.

To the south of Clovelly and its cluster of wineries is a smaller cluster around the town of Kingaroy. Captain’s Paddock is owned by Maryann Pidcock and Peter Eaton – just 4ha of vines and production hovers around 1000 cases. Pidcock has been extremely active in Queensland wine affairs having held the presidency of the Queensland Wine Industry Association. She says she wouldn’t put in more grapes at the moment due to the “lesson learnt from over-supply”, although the region could sustain quite a few more in the right places. As with most of Australia, water availability is the key. With such a small production she would only consider export if she was approached. Asked if she felt organisations such as the Winemakers’ Federation of Australia or Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation neglected Queensland she was quick to say no, as was Adam Chapman and all the others I asked the same question of.



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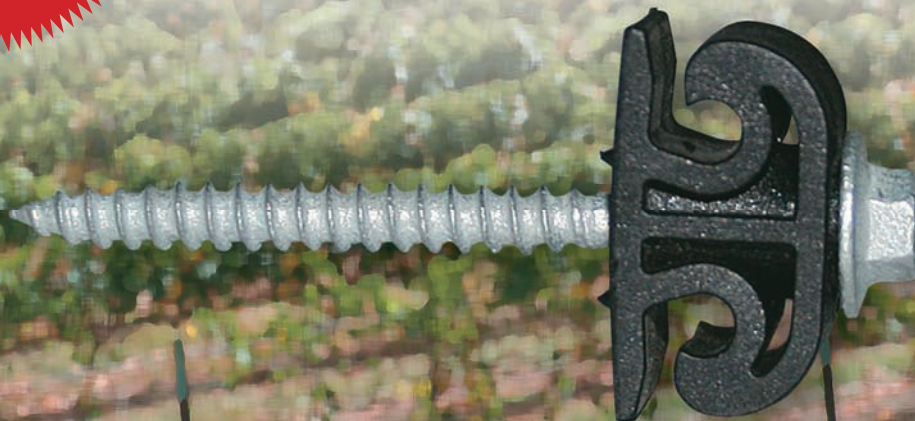


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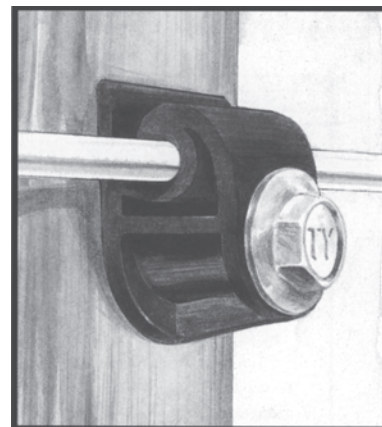


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Pidcock accepts that the comparative remoteness of the region is a drawback, although it's closer to Brisbane and other high-density tourist areas than Coonawarra is to Adelaide or Rutherglen to Melbourne. "We have to take the region to the people," she said, meaning awareness of the region. If its attractions can be highlighted, then people will come to see for themselves. A quite radical line of thought she holds is in regards to more leisure time: "Do you know there are 70 million days of accrued leave owing in Australia," she said. Her idea is a three-day weekend – get the city into the country, get them to relax to enjoy wine, good food and fresh air. She sees her direction not just to produce wine for shipping off to a remote market but to build on the rental cottage business she has established and offer a stressed consumer some hard earned time-out. As to the State wine centre that Penglis was so confident would receive support of all the regions, Maryann Pidcock had heard nothing about it.

The lifestyle theme is taken up at Crane Winery, a couple of kilometres along the road from Captain's Paddock. Established in 1992, it has been owned by Bernie and Judy Cooper for the past three years. Bernie gave up medical science for a sea change to winemaking. Why South Burnett? "It met all the criteria," Bernie said, meaning more than just the wine aspect. Cooper would like to see a bigger, better-known company move into the region to give the region's name a boost. Knowing that it's unlikely in the present environment, he opts for time: "It's not going to happen in three to five years," he said. As with Pidcock, Cooper would be

happy to grow into export but is disinclined to chase the opportunities. Nor is he impressed with wholesalers, saying "why should the person who sells it get more than the person who makes it?" Cooper thinks one way forward for the region is to look at different varieties. Adding to the lifestyle picture is a range of natural soaps and body products made by Judy.

South Burnett compares its climate to the Hunter Valley. Another factor they have in common is the not-so-'lifestyle' industry of coal mining. There is danger of losing some vineyards in the south of the region to coal.

MOVING BEYOND THE CELLAR DOOR

Several times I got the feeling that winery commitment hadn't moved far beyond the cellar door and the practice of promoting poor quality Queensland wine was still very much alive, although (thankfully) facing a strong challenge from an ever-growing band of quality producers.

In an ACNielsen report the Government commissioned in 2006 on increasing retail presence of Queensland wine (not tourism), some of the 'Key Learnings' reported were:

- the trade wants to deal with wineries that are committed to growing beyond the cellar door
- the trade believes the industry needs to recognise the cost of changing perceptions caused by the previous practice of promoting poor quality Queensland wine.

Several times I got the feeling that winery commitment hadn't moved far beyond the cellar door and the practice of promoting poor quality Queensland wine was still very much alive, although (thankfully) facing a strong challenge from an ever-growing band of quality producers.

The next stage of my journey of discovery was the Darling Downs – a region consisting of fewer than 15 wineries spread around a huge area just under 300km from north to south and around 175km east to west. If there is to be a third Queensland GI then apparently this is it. I visited just two wineries, but they were in complete contrast: Wedgetail Ridge Estate is owned by Suzanne Nation – a smart cellar door set-up fronts a winery that was established in 1999 to diversify from cattle and grain on land occupied by the family since 1920. The marketing is extremely slick and Nation is a practiced exponent of the art. Tasting the standard range of wines – Classic White, Chardonnay, Viognier, Shiraz and Durif – I found them sound but not exciting. However, the 'Options' range, wine infused with herbs, was quite extraordinary

Nation was frank about being affected by the over-supply situation – so much good wine and good grapes available at prices below what she could offer. She was also open in admitting she saw the quality of her own product and where it stood in an over-supply market, hence the decision on herbs. Prior to coming back to the family property she had business experience in Asia and sees a market there for herb-infused wines. The range is really a taste experience and worth the effort.

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Jimbour Wines is part of Jimbour Station – a beautiful property with a superb house and gardens. With 22ha of vines it's the largest producer in the region. Peter Scudamore-Smith MW is winemaker and consultant. He says they are still sorting out the direction to take, however, as the majority of sales are within the State, white wine is leading the charge. Petit Verdot vines have been grafted over to Verdelho; Chardonnay is performing well for them and in reds, it's Merlot.

Perhaps because it's the best known, but of the regions I visited, only the Granite Belt had the feel of a wine region as I entered its boundaries. Around half of Queensland's total grapevine plantings are in this region – there are more than 50 cellar doors operating and it is still the most widely-recognised wine-producing region outside the State and internationally. It makes much of its altitude – between 800 and 1000m above sea level – and its mean January temperatures at 21.5°C line up with the Clare Valley and the Northern Rhône.

The Queensland wine industry is one of ongoing metamorphosis – some parts know exactly what they want to be and are striving for true global greatness while others don't deserve to have the shingle 'winery' over the door. Some don't know whether they are a winery or a tourism facility.

Shiraz, Cabernet, Chardonnay and Merlot account for almost 65% of plantings yet the remainder is as diverse a mix as can be found anywhere in Australia. As there are some wonderful wines made from the main varieties, it's a punt to say perhaps the true greatness of the region lies in one or more of the minor varieties, and is yet to be discovered.

As is so often the case, few consumers will get to see the wines that stir wine writers into action. Star of the moment appears to be Boireann winery which, despite its size (1.5ha), has received glowing articles from James Halliday (*The Australian* 23 February) and Max Allen (*The Australian* 12 April). Other wineries that carry the region's reputation to the higher plane are Robert Channon and Ravenscroft. However, in the strange mechanics of regional recognition, the few often carry many.

For numerous years (if not decades) it seemed to be Angelo and Mary Puglisi, proprietors of Ballandean Estate, that carried the region's name and spread its reputation. They and their family are still very much the heart of the region's wine industry – welcoming, warm and generous; they are still expansive in views and producing good wines. Comparative newcomer Symphony Hill (first vintage 2002), owned by the Macpherson family, is producing smart wines. Mike Hayes is viticulturist and winemaker – a straight-talking man: "Ballandean is the Coonawarra of Queensland: Cabernet and Shiraz will be top flight in years to come," he said. Note he said Ballandean (a sub-region), not Granite Belt. Many argue that there are places within the region where grapes shouldn't be planted and the resulting wine will, in the long run, do damage to the reputation of the region. It's good to hear such argument as it shows a maturing region – one that has moved

beyond the adolescent stage and is starting to question its own morals and ambitions.

IMPRESSIONS

The Queensland wine industry is one of ongoing metamorphosis – some parts know exactly what they want to be and are striving for true global greatness while others don't deserve to have the shingle 'winery' over the door. Some don't know whether they are a winery or a tourism facility.

Mixed in with the mature, clever and focussed was a childlike belief in medals and media ratings: "Look, we got a bronze at such-and-such show or three and a bit stars from this magazine." As the Queensland industry expands, one wonders if the vinous tail will catch up or drop off into the vinous theme park. The next decade is going to be fascinating to observe.

The next issue of the *Wine Industry Journal* will contain a review of Merlot and Verdelho wines from Queensland and New England, plus articles on The Queensland College of Wine and Tourism and the New England region.

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