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## QANTAS WINE SHOW – a few words on the UK market

2004 was the year that Australia wrested pole position in the UK market from the French. It was also the year I first visited Australia. The timing could not have been better because, although Australia has maintained its number one position in the UK, today there is a degree of apathy towards its wines in a market that is dominated by big volume brands - wines which could be from anywhere (and increasingly are – Chile and South Africa by way of example).

So it was with great foresight that Wine Australia (the Australian Wine & Brandy Corporation) sent me, then a Fine Wine Manager for Oddbins wine merchants, and three sommeliers from Michelin-starred restaurants, on a whistle stop tour of classic Australian regions. In two and a half weeks we visited Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and New South Wales - it swept us off our feet in more ways than one!

Though Western Australia in Margaret River was our very first port of call, it remained a firm favourite. Why? First, the wines were absolutely informed by their place of origin – the climate and soils. Moreover, these well-adapted Bordeaux red and white varieties provided a refreshing change from the usual “chocolate and vanilla” of Australia, a.k.a. Shiraz and Chardonnay. That said, Western Australia's vanilla came in the form of the “hens and chickens” prone gin gin clone with great fruit wed to a fine spine of acidity - welcome respite from the more buxom styles of Chardonnay now so firmly out of favour. Finally, we loved the bright fruit and elegant, food-friendly structure of Western Australian wines.

These points were and are a huge advantage for Western Australia in the UK's premium wine sector, which has a healthy respect for wines of detail and provenance. So how does Western Australia unlock the potential of this market? For me, it's a question of telling your story and here is why you should be encouraged to tell it:

- Connoisseurs are curious – at May's London International Wine Fair I proposed and chaired the annual Circle of Wine Writers' Masterclass - a presentation by Langtons' Andrew Caillard MW of wines from the Great Wine Estates of Western Australia. Attended by key international press, wine buyers and retailers, demand for tickets well outstripped supply – we could have sold double the 50 tickets available.



- You could be better known – apart from Margaret River, Western Australian wines lack profile. This is my fourth visit to Western Australia and I've had the pleasure of expanding my vinous horizons. As my visits and this show has confirmed, Great Southern produces fabulous Riesling, also Cabernet and Shiraz, Pemberton and Manjimup show great promise with Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Sauvignon and the Swan has world-class fortified wines.
- You have good news - in the UK, vintage reports tend not to differentiate between Australian regions. Western Australia can be tarred with the difficult vintage brush even if it has enjoyed a stunning vintage like 2007 just because the eastern states have not. As the recent Howard Park International Riesling tasting reinforced, Western Australian Rieslings were particularly fleet of foot that year compared with their counterparts from higher profile South Australian Riesling regions.

Going forward, Australia is a vast country, so you cannot rely on generic marketing to tell your story for you, though Wine Australia's Regional Heroes' programme is laying the groundwork in the UK for a greater understanding of regionality. In the current market, it's difficult even for bigger producers to finance independent marketing campaigns. It's time to pursue region-wide initiatives to communicate your story. Here are just a few suggestions:

- Western Australia is great at pitting its wines and wits against the best from the Old World – I've mentioned Howard Park's International Riesling tasting. Other examples include Cape Mentelle's Cabernet Sauvignon tasting and Cullen's Chardonnay tasting. How about following through some of these initiatives on the world stage?
- Focus on your strengths – I've mentioned some regional/variety trump cards already and, with emerging trends like red and white Rhone blends, continue the tradition of can-do-ism and culture of excellence that has established the region's reputation for premium wines. And beware the Sauvignon Blanc monster, currently so fashionable – if New Zealand is in surplus....
- Target an audience who will help you tell your story. There is a thriving independent off-trade and solid fine wining and dining sector in the UK who are receptive to wines of detail and provenance. My fellow UK judge Tom Cannavan asked me to remind you not to be London-centric – the rest of the UK would love to see you!

Last, but by no means least (!), recruit ambassadors like Tom and me, international judges and writers who can help spread the good word.

With thanks for entrusting me to tell your story.

**Sarah Ahmed**  
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