



A corker of a year

Max Allen reflects on an eventful vintage for the wine industry and nominates his top drops for the festive season. Better super-size your Christmas stockings.

What a huge year it's been. Tragedy, betrayal, seduction, mistaken identity – 2009 has been one massive wine opera.

The year started terribly, of course, with the disastrous loss of human life, vineyards and wineries in the Black Saturday bushfires, not to mention the searing heat that had seen leaves and grapes sizzling on the vine throughout much of south-eastern Australia during the weeks leading up to the catastrophe. As well as the immediate heartbreak caused by the conflagration, winemakers also had to cope with the possibility of smoke tainting their wines.

Out of the ashes, though, came triumph. Once the extreme heat had subsided, the end of the 2009 growing season for many producers was mild and benevolent and resulted in some outstanding wines, particularly in the high-altitude regions: I remember tasting still-fermenting cabernet in Orange, central NSW, in April that was already complex, balanced and all-too-

drinkable. For many winemakers, 2009 will go down as one of the better vintages.

This year may also be remembered as the time when the Australian wine industry finally split into two parallel universes. In one, the large-scale, corporate, profit-driven, over-extended commercial industry is floundering – exports have slumped, people are calling for vines to be ripped out. In the other, alternative reality, a network of quality-minded, family-owned producers are making more diverse and exciting wines than ever before.

The future of Australian wine, as 2009 very clearly demonstrates, is in the hands of the latter group: while Constellation Wines and Foster's, this country's two largest companies, were busy closing down or selling wineries – including the heritage-listed Leasingham in the Clare Valley and the iconic Baileys in Glenrowan – a group of 12 of this country's best-known family wine companies grabbed the headlines by launching Australia's First Families of Wine, a collaborative effort to inject some heart and soul back into the industry.

Talking about soul: one of the most exciting trends of 2009 was the launch of a whole host of new sub-regional and single-vineyard wines – the stunning, focused, detailed pinot noirs, for example, made by a new wave of passionate, committed and very talented young(ish) winemakers such as Bill Downie and Mac Forbes.

Another glorious trend that built momentum in 2009 was the introduction of more and more pale, dry, exceedingly food-friendly rosés: wines made with the minimum of skin contact but lots of texture from wild yeast, lees-stirring and barrel-ageing. The inspired-by-Germany trend for off-dry rieslings also continued apace in 2009, as did the proliferation of moscato-style wines: every winery in the country, it seems, is now selling its own version of this low alcohol, grapy, spritzzy summer drink.

The popularity of Kiwi sauvignon blanc was as strong this year as last, but there are signs that the juggernaut may be slowing down just a little: huge vineyard expansion in Marlborough and abundant recent vintages have resulted in an oversupply, and the market has been flooded. There's only so much look-alike, taste-alike, heavily discounted sav blanc that punters will bear before the novelty begins to wear thin. Imports of great-value red wines from the Mediterranean, by contrast, only became more interesting this year: there is now a great diversity of wines at sometimes ludicrously low prices.

The ongoing rush to alternative grape varieties in Australia suffered a momentary pause this year when the grape a lot of growers had planted thinking it was albariño (the sexy white variety originally from Spain) turned out to be savagnin (the decidedly unsexy white variety originally from France). Whatever the name, the wines it makes are good, but a lot of wine-makers (particularly in the warmer areas such as the Riverland) have moved on and are now pinning their>

Christmas crackers
Max Allen draws up a list of his top wines for the year.

WINE

white hopes on the Sardinian grape vermentino and their red hopes on the Sicilian grape nero d'Avola.

Plastic bottles began appearing in wine shop fridges this year, with the Sirromet First Step and Wolf Blass Green Label brands leading the way in less energy-intensive and (slightly) more environmentally friendly packaging. Organics also nudged its way into the mainstream in 2009, with well-attended viticulture conferences in Marlborough and Mildura covering soil health, biodiversity, organics and biodynamics, demonstrating that there is serious interest in sustainability among grape growers in both countries. Two of the country's largest wine companies – Angove and Yalumba – now sell ranges of organic wines.

The “back to the future” spirit was alive and well in many Australian wineries in 2009, too, with increasing numbers of adventurous winemakers adopting ancient, time-honoured methods such as wild yeast fermentation and minimal (or even zero) additions of acid, tannin, enzyme or the preservative sulphur dioxide, in an effort to make more distinctive, natural wines that better express the character of their origins.

And many winemakers are also turning into deliciously rustic farmers – growing their own vegies, bringing heritage breeds of livestock onto the farm (in some cases, even turning that heritage breed livestock into tasty lamb chops, sausages and salami), and making their own beer and cider.

Stocking fillers

This year I'm leaving an extra-large stocking for Santa to fill with these favourite drops of the year, reflecting the key trends of 2009:

BIODYNAMIC CHAMPAGNE

NV Fleury Carte Rouge, Champagne, France, \$90

This nutty, dry example of a small-scale grower Champagne, with its alluring hints of wild strawberry fruit, is exactly what I want to be sipping as I open my pressies on Christmas morning.

NEW WHITE GRAPE

2009 Gemtree Moonstone Savagnin, McLaren Vale, SA, \$25

This'll definitely wake you up on Christmas morning: crisp and gently grapy/floral, like a dry riesling at first, it then builds in the mouth in a grapefruit, pithy way. Scallops, please.

FIRST FAMILY WINE

2005 Tyrrell's Single Vineyard Stevens Semillon, Hunter Valley, NSW, \$33

If, like many Australians, you'll be enjoying the odd seafood platter during the festive season, then it would, I believe, be un-Australian not to open a classic, limy, toasty aged Hunter semillon.

DRY ROSE

2009 Foster e Rocco Rosé, Heathcote, Vic, \$27

Made by a couple of young(ish) sommeliers, this gorgeous sangiovese rosé is simply stunning with just the palest hint of colour, fine rosehip and spice aromas. Creamy

but dry to finish, it's perfect for leftover turkey.

FARMHOUSE CIDER

2009 Small Acres Norfolk Still Medium Dry Cyder, Orange, NSW, \$15

Located in the heart of the Orange wine region, which has a long history of apple-growing, Small Acres produces wonderful, authentic, gently sweet and full-flavoured ciders using proper, old-fashioned cider apples.

BARGAIN LOCAL

2009 De Bortoli Windy Peak Nouveau Shiraz, Vic, \$15

The perfect thing to have on hand (buy a few bottles) for when your friends drop by for an impromptu Christmas or New Year barbecue, this bursts with spicy, sappy, juicy red berry fruit. Lively, fresh and gluggable.

BARGAIN IMPORT

2007 Borie de Maurel Esprit d'automne, Minervois, France, \$18

The perfect thing to have on hand for a special occasion when you want to try something a bit more exotic. I adore this southern French blend of syrah, carignan and grenache with its intense black fruit and wild herbal edges.

SINGLE-VINEYARD PINOT NOIR

2007 Seresin Rachel Pinot Noir, Marlborough, NZ, \$60

There's more to the Kiwis than sav blanc – and young Aussies aren't the only winemakers playing with single vineyards. This particularly stellar example is complex and undergrowthy, with a stunning, long finish.

SULPHUR-FREE RED

2009 Lowe Preservative-free Merlot, Mudgee, NSW, \$20

A brilliant example (from a cracking vintage) of how it's possible to make totally delicious wine without adding preservatives: dark purple in colour, this is stuffed with luscious, slurpy black fruit.*

Stockists p225

DECEMBER WINE NEWS

CHOCOHOLICS REJOICE

Adelaide Hills winery Hahndorf Hill has added another layer to its popular cellar-door experience: visitors can now indulge in some seriously top-end chocolate (single-estate, single-variety choccie from Venezuela, Trinidad and around the world) carefully matched with wines from the cellar. The experience costs \$20 to \$30, depending on how fancy you want to go. hahndorfhillwinery.com.au

HERITAGE VINEYARDS CELEBRATED

The Hunter Valley Wine Industry Association has launched a Heritage Register – a catalogue of the region's vines. Some of the vines in these plots have a lineage stretching back to the cuttings James Busby brought to Australia from pre-phylloxera France in the early 19th century. To celebrate, the region's winemakers are releasing more single-vineyard wines from these old blocks of magic dirt.

GEE LONG SUPERSTARS

Following their nomination for *Gourmet Traveller WINE's* 2009 Winemakers of the Year award, Lethbridge grape-treading duo Ray Nadeson and Maree Collis shone at this year's Geelong Wine Show. The pair was responsible for winning every major trophy – Best Wine of Show for their 2008 Lethbridge Chardonnay, Best Pinot Noir for their 2008 Hat Rock Vineyard Pinot Noir, and Best Shiraz for their 2008 Que Syrah Syrah. lethbridgewines.com.au