

Australia and New Zealand Wine Tour March 2007

Tasting notes – notes made on my 2 week whistle stop tour of Australia and New Zealand, visiting all the wineries represented by one of our suppliers – Liberty Wines.

Plantagenet Wines, Mount Barker, Western Australia

The main winery in this expanding area of WA, about an hour north of Albany. Plantagenet produce two labels – the top white label wines (riesling, chardonnay, cabernet & shiraz) and a lower level range, Omrah. They also make the Hellfire Bay range of wines (entry level). A new winemaker has just started, John Durham (formerly of Cape Mentelle), and there is a strong sense from within that these wines will move on to a higher level.

The white label riesling and shiraz are undoubtedly the stars, although I was disappointed to find almost everything (even the top wines) machine harvested. A very efficient, modern winery.

Plantagenet Riesling 1997 – cool year. Youthful still. Lime, honey, floral notes on nose. Slight sourness on palate but incredibly dry and minerally. Lovely clean acidity. Decent length of flavour.

Plantagenet Riesling 2001 – more classic riesling nose. Lime, petrol, mineral, very nice. Lime, citrus character on palate, great acidity, really clean. Petrol notes, very mineral and slaty. Richer than 1997 (warmer year) but very well balanced. Massive length of finish. MUSEUM STOCK AVAILABLE. RECOMMENDED.

Plantagenet Riesling 2005 – light, youthful nose. Some tropical fruit, apricot, white stone fruit. Notes of petrol. Lovely clean minerality on palate, really fresh with lovely mouth weight and balance. Massive length. RECOMMENDED.

Plantagenet Riesling 2006 – very expressive nose. Really fruity, peach, fruit salad, floral. Cool vintage. Very complex, mineral, petrol. Lovely on palate, high acidity, very clean, lovely fruit character. Good structure. Not as long as 2005 but excellent. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Plantagenet Riesling 1981 – with lunch. Beautiful deep yellow colour. Petrol nose with lovely creaminess, very toasty (even though it has seen no oak at all). Beautiful weight on palate, very creamy again and honeyed notes. Acidity still quite crisp. Great length.

Plantagenet Chardonnay 2005 – nice creamy nose. Quite complex. This wine was fermented using wild yeasts so has added complexity. Grapefruit and citrus on palate. Oak in balance, quite tight at present, needs time to open up. Good length of finish. These grapes were hand picked!! Good.

Plantagenet Pinot Noir 2005 (this wine now discontinued) – light garnet colour. Ageing prematurely. Sweet strawberry cheesecake nose, very inviting. Cherry, strawberry fruit on palate, not as sweet as nose and some dry dusty tannins. Delicate but a little short on the finish.

Plantagenet Cabernet Sauvignon 1994 – Deep purple core, opaque, brick rim. Blackcurrant, cassis nose, earthy, touch of blackcurrant/tomato leaf. Nice cassis fruit on palate as well as cigar and earthy

notes. Good structure and very elegant. Long finish, still plenty of time ahead of it.
RECOMMENDED.

Plantagenet Cabernet Sauvignon 1998 – Really deep ruby colour. Slightly restrained and backward on nose. Black currant and berry fruit, earthy, less herbal than 1994. Good structure and balance, elegant. Not particularly expressive. Decent finish.

Plantagenet Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 – deep colour again (Plantagenet plunge the cap extracting lots of colour and tannin). Cooler vintage. Less expressive on nose but very elegant and pleasant. Tobacco, cassis and herbs. Decent weight on palate, tannins quite high, elegant structure. Black fruit and bay leaves. Good length.

Plantagenet Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 – Deep colour. Currant, leather, tobacco on nose. Herbal and earthy again, a recurrent theme in these wines. Very tannic but sweet black fruit on palate. Nice balance and structure. Really long finish, will be very good in time. **RECOMMENDED.**

Plantagenet Shiraz 1994 – deep ruby core but mahogany tints at rim. Earthy, leathery black fruit nose, blueberry as well. Lovely weight on palate, smooth dusty tannins. Good fruit and spice, white pepper. A more restrained cool climate European style of wine. Decent finish, but drink up.

Plantagenet Shiraz 1998 – beautiful deep ruby colour. Lovely nose of sweet black fruits, plum, damson, spice, chocolate and oak. Spicy black fruit on palate, earthy and leathery notes. Tannins soft and elegant, beautiful. Really elegant and very good. **MUSEUM STOCK AVAILABLE. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Plantagenet Shiraz 1999 – lighter in colour with a really white pepper nose, almost too much. Delicate dark fruit. Good weight and balance on palate, really spicy. Very complex. High acidity and medium tannins. Good structure. Classic cool climate shiraz. Long. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Plantagenet Shiraz 2003 – wetter and cooler year. Deep ruby colour, opaque core. Blueberry and damson nose with spice notes. Really fresh dark fruit on palate. More simple than 1999 but very pleasant. Decent finish. For earlier consumption.

Plantagenet Shiraz 2004 – youthful colour. Lovely sweet dark fruit nose, touch of pepper, follows through on palate. Very elegant on palate, more so than 2003. Still a touch closed with acidity and tannins keeping the structure very tight. A massive finish, this is a very stylish wine that will develop beautifully. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Plantagenet Shiraz Viognier 2005 – tasted over lunch, soon to be in UK. Very classy, the 6% viognier adding lightness to the shiraz. Worth tasting again when it arrives. **RECOMMENDED.**

Plantagenet “Off the rack” Chenin Blanc – dessert wine. Late harvest grapes picked and then dried on racks. Barrel fermented. Lovely sweet grapey nose, sweet fruit. Luscious in mouth without being cloying. Melon fruit and grapes. Almost fools you into thinking the wine is dry as the finish is so clean. Good.

Omrah Sauvignon Blanc 2006 – nice green, nettle nose. Tart gooseberry on palate. Okay but not particularly exciting.

Omrah Unoaked Chardonnay 2005 – slightly grapey character on nose with citrus notes and a tomato like character. Little bit tart on palate. Lean. Decent acidity and decent length. Not overly complex, but not trying to be.

Omrah Unoaked Chardonnay 2006 – green lime and citrus nose, some gooseberry and apple. More tropical on palate, really high acidity. Again, quite clean and a decent length finish, but nothing here to make you want to reach for a second bottle.

Omrah Pinot Noir 2006 – deep ruby colour. Cherry & raspberry fruit on nose as well as sultanas. Almost Beaujolais like (carbonic maceration). Pleasant. Strawberry fruit and darker fruits on palate, nice flavour and lovely balance. Decent finish. Good.

Omrah Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 – warm vintage, deep ruby red colour, opaque core. Classic cabernet nose of cassis, blackcurrant, as well as earthy and herbal notes. Good flavour on palate, dark berry fruit, silky tannins. Smoky notes alongside black fruit. Very well made. 20% new oak. Good finish. Very good.

Omrah Shiraz 2004 – Dense ruby red colour. Youthful fresh nose. Blueberry, treacle on nose and palate. Silky tannins and nice spice notes. Good length. Nice.

Hellfire Bay Chardonnay 2005 – typical Aussie chardonnay nose, tropical fruit and oaky, toasty notes. Melon, tropical fruit, grapefruit on palate. Oak on finish. A bit uninspiring.

Hellfire Bay Shiraz 2004 – still youthful. 6% grenache in blend. Warm damson and plum nose. Bright on palate, nice dark fruit and spice. Good length. Decent at price point.

Cullen Wines, Margaret River, Western Australia

Situated in Margaret River, this is a premium winery in a premium wine growing region. Vanya Cullen has adopted fully bio-dynamic practices in the vineyard and the winery and, whilst I do not fully understand how planting a cow horn full of manure in the ground, digging it up, diluting in water and spraying works, the soil and vines (completely unirrigated) look extremely healthy. And the wines are stunning across the range.

I wonder if they taste better when there is a full moon? I will have to try this theory.

Sauvignon Semillon blends all see some new French oak, which adds weight and creaminess to the palate. Mostly they are also wild yeast ferment, which adds complexity.

Mangan Sauvignon Semillon 2006 – 60% sauv blanc, 40% sem. 15% of sb fermented in new French oak for 3 months. Pale lemon colour. Grassy nose, waxy notes, some creaminess. Lovely weight on palate, very elegant. More old world in style. Green grassy fruit, creamy mid palate, fills out nicely. Lovely balancing acidity. Really long finish. RECOMMENDED.

Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2006 – 80% sauv blanc, 20% sem. 45% matured in new French oak. Fuller nose than Mangan. Lovely clean citrus flavours, good acidity & balance. Long finish.

Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2005 – approx 80-90% sauv blanc in this blend. Partially oak fermented and matured in new oak 5 months. Slightly closed nose. More weight on mid palate, fresh lime, minerally, creamy. Great crisp acidity. Really long finish.

Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2004 – 77% sauv blanc, 23% sem. 18% fermented in new oak. Becoming more rounder and waxy on nose. Cut grass & citrus. Toasty on palate with added weight. Good acidity and clean dry long finish.

Semillon Sauvignon Blanc 2003 – 54% sem, 46% sauv blanc. 75% sauv barrel fermented. Full nose, green fruits and citrus. Touch of tomato leaf also. Lovely and creamy on palate, passionfruit and lime, flinty as well. Beautiful weight, lovely acidity and a really long finish. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2002 – 80% sauv blanc, 20% sem. 2/3 sauv barrel fermented. Complex nose of straw and passionfruit. Lovely elegant wine, green notes on palate with creaminess filling out the mid palate. Really long and complex finish. **RECOMMENDED.**

Very elegant and complex set of wines that will add complexity as they age (up to 10 years in most cases). Excellent with oysters, crustaceans and fish.

Chardonnay 2005 – complex nose of ripe melon, lime, lemon and match stick aromas. Also some nougat. Quite tight on palate but very elegant. Citrus and smoky character. Very well balanced. Long finish.

Chardonnay 2004 – lovely creamy nose with tropical fruit and citrus notes. Lovely weight on palate, tropical and citrus again. Great balance, new French oak well integrated (only 5 months). Very complex and gorgeous, the wild yeast fermentation adding complexity to the mid palate. The acidity is perfect, keeping the wine lovely and fresh. Not a long term wine, but lovely nonetheless. **RECOMMENDED.**

Chardonnay 2003 – light gold colour. Really tropical nose with subtle creamy oak notes. Very velvety on palate, firm acidity and lovely weight. Massive length. Very good.

Chardonnay 2002 – lemon & guava notes backed up by buttery hints. Very complex and delicious palate, citrus, tropical, creamy, balanced acidity, great structure. All in harmony and still developing, this has another 5 years at least. Excellent. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Chardonnay 2001 – oxidised. Didn't get to try another sample unfortunately.

These chardonnays seem to get better with age. Very elegant and complex.

Mangan 2005 – malbec, petit verdot blend. Intense purple core and rim. Serious smoky nose of blueberry and blackcurrant. Lovely soft spiciness. Again, supremely elegant on the palate with lovely structure and balance. Nice ripe fruit, spice, quite high acidity. Soft silky tannins but all quite tight still, needs time to open fully and soften. Good length.

Diana Madeline Cabernet Merlot 2005 – rated alongside 1995 as a classic. Light purple colour. Lovely youthful nose of cassis and black fruit, plum also. Powerful and sumptuous on palate, fine

grained tannins but needs time. Great elegance and structure to go on for 15 years +.
RECOMMENDED.

Diana Madeline Cabernet Merlot 2004 – soft purple colour. Nose a little bit closed at first but opens deliciously. Cassis, blackcurrant, raspberry, cherry, tobacco/cigar, cedar and soft oak. Very complex. Lovely weight & balance on palate, blackcurrant fruit, cedar, tobacco, silky tannins. Really smooth and elegant. Long finish. Lovely. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Diana Madeline Cabernet Merlot 2003 – more closed nose, less complex than 2004. Black fruits, violets and cigar box. Lighter on the palate, more forward this year. Silky and elegant yet again but a softer structure. For earlier consumption.

Diana Madeline Cabernet Merlot 2002 – deeper red colour. Black fruits and mocha notes on nose. Quite tight on palate, fruit a little closed at present. Framed within a silky tannic structure, this is quite restrained and has mocha, coffee and cedar notes. Very claret like. Well balanced and a decent finish. Needs more time.

Diana Madeline Cabernet Merlot 2001 – as deep purple/ruby as any of later vintages, opaque core. Nose needs to be coaxed out but lovely aromas of black fruit, mulberry, spice and more savoury notes than other vintages. Beautiful on palate, black cherry and plum, silky smooth fine grained tannins, super structure and length. Good now but developing like a thoroughbred. Stunning. 15 years plus.
VERY HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot 2000 – purple core, ruby red rim. Sweet fruit nose, almost confectioned (I have “Coca-Cola notes” written down, but this is a bit offensive). Lighter on palate, and a bit less structured. Very soft and approachable and I’d be drinking this now. Charming.

Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot 1999 – deep ruby colour, starting to show age on rim. Nose of plum, black fruit and creamy oak. Nice cherry flavours on palate, earthy notes. Fine tannins and good structure. Drinking well now but at least 10 years to go. Very good.

Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot 1998 – deep ruby colour. Lovely nose of mulberry, cassis and vanillin oak, very complex. Beautiful weight on palate, lovely black fruit and silky tannins. Complexity. Lovely acidity keeping the wine fresh, really long finish. Excellent. **VERY HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot 1997 – really deep purple colour still. Complex nose of blackcurrant fruit and creamy oak. Super weight on palate and great structure. Supremely elegant with rich cassis, mulberry, chocolate, lovely silky tannins. Long. Very, very good. **RECOMMENDED.**

Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot 1996 – still deep ruby colour. These wines get better with age. Very inviting nose of cassis and dark fruits. Sublime on palate, much more expressive than nose. Cassis, plum, mulberry, blueberry, chocolate, soft smoky cigar box. Incredibly complex. Great structure and mouth feel, fine grained tannins, lovely acidity. Fresh. Massive finish. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot 1995 – deep ruby colour, brick rim. Plum & mulberry aromas with cedar notes. Cherry and raspberry on palate, tight structure, tannins a bit more grippy. Quite spicy also. Very good again though.

Wines enjoyed at Cullen dinner (can't remember all of these as they were served so quickly)

Cullen Chardonnay 2005 magnums – very good

Pierro Chardonnay 2003 – excellent

Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay 2001 & 1999

Moss Wood Cabernet 2000 – very impressive

Haughton Gladstone 1998

Vasse Felix Heytesbury 1995 – very impressive

Voyager Cabernet 1994

Howard Park 1992

Cullen Cab Merlot 1988 – ruby red colour, mahogany rim. Nose of fig/dried fruit. Very soft on palate, silky & elegant. Lacking a little weight on mid palate, past its best.

Cullen Cab Merlot 1979 – fruit almost oxidised, out of balance I thought.

Cullen Cab Merlot Reserve 1988 – big step up from straight 1988, more structured, **excellent**

Cape Mentelle Cabernet 1979 & 1983 – 1983 fresh red berry and earthy fruit, nice, drink now.

Cullen Cab Merlot 1983 – decent colour still, cassis nose and quite gamey. Still quite structured, nice cassis fruit, good acidity, silky tannins. Long finish, **Excellent**.

Jeffrey Grosset, Clare Valley, South Australia

The Number One man for riesling in Australia, Jeff is an intense and very intellectual man with a dry sense of humour. I have to admit that I've never fully understood all the hype about his wines, but I am learning fast. They are very intelligent wines, linear and austere often when young but they have got the structure to last for years. My big regret is that we did not get to taste any older vintages of the riesling particularly, would have been a very educational exercise. Jeff's partner, Stephanie Toole, makes her Mount Horrocks wines at the next door property (see below).

Jeff is very much into terroir and when you see where he has planted some of his vineyards you can see that he doesn't just do things randomly. He puts a lot of effort and research into finding the right plots, soils, aspects. Also into the harmony with the earth movement, Gaia (his top red) being the Greek name for the Goddess of the Earth. Jeff is well into the Lovelock Gaia movement which sees the earth as a superorganism.

We had a lovely dinner here in the winery and were treated to some very good older vintage wines from their personal cellar (Dalwhinnie, Wendouree, d'Arenberg). A very generous and genuinely nice couple.

Watervale Riesling 2006 – nice nose, some peachy fruit, citrus. Very minerally and clean, quite tight linear palate. Lime and citrus fruit. Huge crisp acidity but in balance. Petrol notes already developing. Long finish. **RECOMMENDED**.

Polish Hill Riesling 2006 - closed nose, very tight. Some honey notes. Builds in the mouth, very clean and minerally, some citrus notes. Very high acidity again and very cleansing. Quite austere. Long finish. I'm afraid I still don't rave about these wines as much as everyone else. I would like to stick this away for 5-10 years and then see its true beauty.

Sauvignon Semillon 2006 – 50:50 blend. Very elegant nose, quite minerally, nice lifted melon fruit. Very European style. Elegant citrus fruit, clean at first and then building into lovely weight on mid

palate. Good acidity and a very long finish. This gets more intense as you go. Semillon from Clare, Sauvignon from Adelaide Hills. Very good.

Piccadilly Chardonnay 2005 – Adelaide Hills. Pale lemon colour. Lovely nose of apricot, peach and creamy oak. Lovely weight in mouth, tropical fruit, citrus, smoky, vanilla oak. Lovely fresh acidity. Builds in the mouth as with other Grosset wines. Long finish. 50% ageing in new French oak for 6 months. Quite a big wine but very elegant and stylish. RECOMMENDED.

Pinot Noir 2005 – lovely rich smoky mulberry and damson nose. Black fruit on palate with smoke and spice. Little bit of tannic grip. Nice levels of acidity. A decent enough wine but at a rrp of £25 this is overpriced.

Gaia 2004 – deep plum colour. Plum, black cherry, licorice and smoky nose. Slightly stalky? Certainly herbaceous. Smoky black fruit on palate, fine grained tannins, nice structure and weight. Long finish and one for the long term.

Wines over dinner the previous evening (thus the short notes – it was very late).

Gaia 2002 – lovely, a classic.

Gaia 2001 – more floral (that's all I've got)

Gaia 1996 – a stunner, lovely and fresh, great structure.

Gaia 1993 – quite farmyard and meaty/gamey, really soft on palate, nicer on palate than nose.

Mt Horrocks Shiraz 1998 – stinky leathery farmyard nose, raisiny on palate, still decent tannins, wouldn't pick out as shiraz

Dalwhinnie Cabernet 1999 – nice and classic, elegant but lacking a little on the mid palate.

Wendouree Cabernet 1994 – lovely big black fruit, spicy nose. Nice mouth feel, well liked by group. Slightly lacking on mid palate for me but decent length.

D'Arenberg Cabernet 1985 – quite unusual stinky mushroom/forest floor nose. Much better on palate with sweet rich spicy fruit, great acidity and lovely silky tannins. Very long finish. **Excellent**.

Mount Horrocks, Clare Valley, South Australia

I think these wines are more feminine and therefore more approachable earlier on than Jeff's wines.

Watervale Riesling 2006 – lovely classic riesling nose of lime and petrol notes, bit of peachiness and floral notes, also apple and passion fruit. Very complex indeed. Lovely lightness on palate, very clean and not as fruity as nose. Quite lean, but very nice. Firm backbone of acidity. Not massive length, bone dry finish. I think that this will be excellent with another year of bottle age.

Semillon 2005 – oak fermented. Nose a bit muted. A little bit of white stone fruit but almost a balloon/rubbery smell. Weird. New oak very evident on palate, overpowers fruit a little. Quite citrusy and a decent finish.

Shiraz 2004 – deep purple colour. Smoky black cherry, damson and blueberry nose. Really smoky on palate. Quite tight and fruit a bit locked up within the structure of fine grained tannins and acidity. Elegant mouth feel but needs time. 40% new oak ageing.

Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 – lovely colour. Ripe black fruit on nose. Decent fruit on palate, black and red. Silky and elegant tannins. Nice and fresh but lacking weight slightly on mid palate. Elegant and quite feminine. Good length.

Cordon Cut Riesling 2006 – a stunner, no wonder the Queen loves this. Super sweet fruit but not cloying, being balanced by high acidity. Interesting to see in the vineyards as they cut the cordon spurs when the fruit is ripe and then leave to hang for another 6 weeks or so to concentrate the sugars.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

2007 barrel sample – deeper in colour and richer, will be a long lasting wine.

Charles Melton Wines, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Unfortunately, we didn't see much of the Barossa, driving in, having a glass of sparkling shiraz with Charlie (not really my cup of tea), and then driving out again to spend an afternoon and evening on his house boat on the Murray River.

Tasted a number of Charlie's wines on the boat that evening but Charlie is so laid back that he doesn't do things the way others do. It's quite refreshing but then I don't have any notes to show for it. The Nine Popes is superb and I do enjoy the Shiraz also. Rich expressions of Barossa wine. Also tasted some barrel samples of shiraz which were all good and will be blended into the flagship shiraz.

As sales of the shiraz seem to be struggling a little, Charlie is soon to launch a number of single vineyard shiraz. Why he just doesn't make more Nine Popes which sells out is a bit of a mystery. One theory was that there was not enough old vine grenache to make up the blend, but Melton's marketing lady dismissed this idea. However, she didn't explain why they weren't doing something that seems obvious to everyone else. People are strange. A good evening however.

Shaw & Smith, Adelaide Hills, South Australia

Like many we found on our travels, S&S are looking for elegance, complexity and length in their wines over raw power which was, for so long, the Aussie way. S&S have recently built a very impressive state of the art winery but you can't help feeling that, classy as it is, it's a step away from the likes of us small independents. It's a bit of a slick marketing machine and whilst Michael Hill Smith MW and Martin Shaw are undoubtedly good at what they do, there is a suspicion of style over substance here.

I like some of their wines but I can't say I connected at all, despite a very nice lunch. Michael espoused the virtues of Australian wineries sticking to their regionality (a word that came up a lot along with terroir) and concentrating on the varieties that excel in each region (shiraz in Barossa, cab merlot in Margaret River & Coonawarra, semillon & shiraz in Hunter, riesling in Clare, sauvignon in Adelaide Hills etc) only to then show a couple of riesling which they are trialling. A little bit hypocritical I thought, as did others, particularly as the wines were austere in the extreme.

Sauvignon Blanc 2006 – water white, very gooseberry & herbaceous on nose. More NZ end of spectrum than Loire. Very clean and dry, very refreshing, nice weight on palate. Very good acidity & great length, very well balanced. As elegant as Sancerre but with more flavour (although not as overt

as Marlborough). Very good. **RECOMMENDED**. Also tasted some unfermented 2007 juice – delicious fruit and wonderful acidity, will be excellent.

Riesling 2004 – water white, muted petrol & lime nose, citrus & white fruit hints also. Extremely dry, quite austere & grippy on palate. Very high acidity. Very lean. Not approachable at this point.

Riesling 2006 – more aromatic & honeyed on nose. Slightly more rounded on palate but with massive acidity. Nice structure but very unforgiving. Fruit still hidden. A keeper.

M3 Chardonnay 2002 – pale lemon colour. Very complex tropical nose, banana, raspberry tinge, passion fruit, hazelnut. Follows through on palate with toasty oak as well, lovely weight and elegance. Crisp acidity, massive length. 8 months in 1-2 yo French oak. **RECOMMENDED**.

M3 Chardonnay 2005 – very pale lemon colour. Closed on nose at first, it does open up to reveal subtle notes of citrus, melon & creamy oak. High acidity, very elegant and a linear structure at this stage. Needs a bit of time.

M3 Chardonnay 2006 – deeper colour than 2005, more expressive on nose. Melon, citrus, tropical (passion fruit). Palate as nose, quite lean but a good length citrus finish. Needs a bit of time to develop.

Shiraz 2004 – bright purple red colour. Lovely nose of ripe mulberry & plum fruit, subtle licorice, spice, leather, chocolate & herbs. Very elegant on palate, still quite tight with a good structure, tannins evident but not too heavy. Black pepper coming through. Moderate acidity. Clean finish of decent length. Well made wine.

Shiraz 2005 – deep purple colour, opaque core. Deeper more serious nose than 2004. Dark smoky fruit, more richness on palate. Grippy tannins giving wine a bit more oomph. Medium acidity. Very well balanced and decent length. Very good. **RECOMMENDED**.

John Duval Wines, Barossa, South Australia

Wines tasted at Shaw & Smith.

Ex Penfolds-Grange winemaker who produces just two wines at present, the GSM Plexus and the straight Shiraz. Soon to release some single vineyard Shiraz from selected Barossa parcels. A really nice man who makes very elegant wines.

Plexus 2003 – from a warm vintage, 46% shiraz, 32% grenache, 22% mourvedre. Deep damson colour, ruby rim. Black fruits, currants, silky sweet spice on nose. Lovely silky spicy palate. Fine grained tannins framing the elegant black fruit. Very good length. Is this ageing more quickly than expected though? Drink now.

Plexus 2004 – 49% shiraz, 27% grenache, 24% mourvedre. Cooler vintage but deeper in colour. Earthy nose, spicy black fruit, elegant. Lovely weight on palate, slightly fuller, excellent balance between black fruit and spice. Subtle oak well integrated. Really elegant and lovely. Nice fresh acidity, all in harmony. Long finish. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED**.

Plexus 2005 – 55% shiraz, 34% mourvedre, 11% grenache. Dense purple colour, warmer vintage than 2004. Similar nose to 2004, fruit slightly brighter. Blueberry, mulberry, subtle sweet spice. Very elegant on palate, rich fruit builds through mid palate. Red fruit lift at end. Lovely. Fine tannins and good acidity. Long finish. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Entity Shiraz 2004 – deep ruby colour & rim. Rich spicy nose of dark brambly fruit. Very elegant (yet again), touch of spice. Rich spicy fruit on palate, well structured. Decent tannin levels but well integrated. Good acidity. Great balance, massive finish. One for keeping. **RECOMMENDED.**

Entity Shiraz 2005 – deep purple core & rim. Pronounced mulberry, blueberry & black cherry nose, spice also. Still quite closed and refined. Quite big on palate, black forest fruits, spice, chocolate. Decent fine grained tannins, good acidity. Tight and elegant at present, very long again. Another that needs time but will be outstanding. **RECOMMENDED.**

Balnaves, Coonawarra, South Australia

Small family winery who are making some superb cabernet. Winemaker Pete Bissell is becoming a bit of a superstar and The Balnaves family seem very reluctant to expose him to the trade for fear of losing him. He also makes wines for Parker Estate in Coonawarra and is considered one of the top winemakers in Australia.

These wines were tasted over dinner in Adelaide, thus some notes are very vague.

Sparkling Cabernet 2007 – not a style I particularly care for or like and this did nothing to change my opinion.

Chardonnay 2005 – lovely and fresh, very good. Crisp (no malo undertaken) yet complex (barrel fermented, lees contact for 10 months).

Cabernet Merlot 2002 – sweet nose of cassis fruit, chocolate, more commercial sweeter style on palate. Very impressive though.

Cabernet Merlot 2004 – classic style which opens up in glass beautifully. Very good indeed.

Cabernet Sauvignon 2002 – very good now, will improve further with age. Classic Coonawarra cabernet.

Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 – this one needs more time. Tannins are quite weighty.

The Tally Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 – only 500-600 cases produced on their top wine. Excellent, one of the wines of the trip. Deep black fruit, subtle vanillin oak, opulent fruit on palate, lovely and rich but a classic structure and perfect balance, easy to see why this wine has been receiving high praise. Good now but with the structure to go on for years, a big wine but all in harmony. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Mitolo, McLaren Vale, South Australia

Frank Mitolo and Ben Glaetzer, as well as their team (all the grapes are purchased from the Italian Lipresti family next door), are a bit like a young macho Mafia crowd. All dressed in black, they give the impression of young guys with money who are having a great time making their wine (Frank's family are one of the largest potato & onion growers in the country). I wasn't sure that I liked the set up when we arrived, but they did grow on me as we sat around having a few beers (after a helicopter ride over the vineyards). Their keywords are "Purity, Elegance, Power". They certainly get the power, making their wines in an incredibly rich extracted style, high in alcohol (not really for me), and they do get purity of fruit. Elegant is not how I'd describe them and the fact that they receive very high Parker points points towards the sort of style the wines are. However, these guys (despite being backed by money) want to make money and they do sell out each vintage. Fair play to them.

Jester Sangiovese Rose 2006 – pretty colour, sweet fruit. Very dry, quite rich & powerful but balanced.

Jester Shiraz 2005 – deep ruby red colour, mulberry & cherry nose, smooth oak. Big in mouth, ripe fruit, medium silky tannins. Smoky & spicy, not huge length.

Jester Shiraz 2006 – lighter in colour, less extracted. Younger nose, red fruits, smoky cigar. Darker fruit on palate, tighter, closed, smoke. Grippy tannins. Quite high acidity (added). Out of balance.

Reiver Shiraz 2005 (Barossa) – deep ruby red colour. More classy nose of black fruits, gun flint, smokiness. Slight minerality. Big on palate but nice structure. Very big tannins framing a tight fruit core. Oak integrated, decent length finish.

GAM Shiraz 2005 (McLaren Vale) – deep purple colour. Sweet fruit nose. More confected and commercial. Cherry, bramble, plum, pepper, quite pleasant. Very powerful on palate but with some structure. Good dark fruit and spice, grippy tannins. Decent acidity, massive finish. Good for style but miles too big for me.

Savitar Shiraz 2005 – deep purple colour, ruby rim. Powerful nose of mulberry, blueberry, plum, chocolate. Complex. Very big on palate, huge tannins overpowering fruit. Monstrous, needs time to calm down.

Jester Cabernet 2006 – ruby red/purple colour. Blackcurrant and blackberry nose, blueberry also. Herbal/herbaceous notes. Big on palate again, but a bit less structured. Grippy tannins, quite high acidity, slightly out of balance. Decent length.

Serpico Cabernet 2005 – add dried grapes to produce an Amarone style wine. Lighter in colour than expected, ruby red core and lighter rim. Really lifted redcurrant, wild strawberry nose. Sweet rich ripe fruit on palate. Fresh. Quite explosive and spicy. Tannins more fine grained, still big on palate, long finish. Very rich, but expected in this style. I actually quite liked this. **RECOMMENDED.**

Reiver Shiraz 2001 – under cork (all other wines under stelvin). Light ruby red colour, surprisingly ageing quickly. Softer nose of dark dried fruits. Softer on palate with fine dusty tannins and moderate acidity. Good.

GAM Shiraz 2002 – deep ruby colour. Smoky and herbaceous nose. Less intense on palate and fruit disappears very quickly. Gone past the fruit bomb stage and now drying out very quickly. Surprisingly so given the massive glob of fruit that was sealed under screwcap.

Savitar Shiraz 2002 – medium intensity purple in colour. Elegant nose of black smoky fruit and spice. Silky and elegant on palate, nicely framed black fruit within a finer tannic structure. Fresh acidity and a smooth elegant finish that lasts a decent length of time. Very good.

Willunga 100, McLaren Vale, South Australia

A label produced in conjunction with Liberty Wines who were aiming for a range of wines at about the £10 level that fully over delivered for the price. What they got – a wine produced by a large old industrial winery called Tinlins – was something of a disappointment to them (reading between the lines) and a wine that retails at about £8 rather than £10. This is a difficult price point in the UK market and, despite Liberty's best efforts, sales are struggling.

Whilst Tinlins own a good 20% of the best vineyards in McLaren Vale and supply wine for the top blends of Penfolds, Hardys et al, they have got it wrong with the Willunga 100 range (see further on for another range they produce for Liberty – Redfin – where they have got it right). It's too manufactured for me, the use of oak staves as an ingredient just one of the disappointing features. We also tasted the wines at an incredibly quick pace, almost as if the winemaker was embarrassed by some of the wines.

Grenache 2005 – sold in some Sainsburys for £7.99 (another negative for the brand). Deep purple core, slightly watery rim. Lifted damson and blueberry nose, some spice and savoury notes also. Medium weight on palate, spicy smoky black fruit, soft tannins, not particularly complex or well structured. Not very long. Simple, not worth the money.

Grenache 2006 – light purple colour, again a bit watery. Simple red fruit nose. Pleasant enough sweet fruit on palate with balancing acidity (added). Clean finish. Okay.

Cabernet Shiraz 2005 – deep purple in colour, opaque core. Cassis and smoky nose. Okay on palate, moderate fruit, bit of tannic grip. Simple.

Cabernet Shiraz 2006 – co-fermented old vines. Very deep colour. Nice nose of mulberry, plum, black fruit and spice. Quite heavily extracted. Rich black fruit on palate, blackcurrant, plum, some spice, lacking structure slightly. Quite commercial in style and the rich fruit glob will be liked by some. Decent length finish. Better than 2005.

Shiraz Viognier 2005 – deep purple core, ruby rim. Nose quite closed. Quite elegant on palate, but fruit a bit muted. Lifted by viognier. Again, a bit short.

Shiraz Viognier 2006 – deep colour. Big smoky nose, mocha notes. Bigger hotter vintage. More extraction, rich black fruit, licorice, smoke, spice. Commercial fruit bomb again. Decent length. Half decent.

Stephen Pannell Wines, McLaren Vale, South Australia

Ex chief winemaker at Hardys (responsible for Eileen Hardy Shiraz etc), Steve dropped out to go freelance and work in Piedmont (with the Vajras, I think) before returning to his homeland to take up a

consultant position with Tinlins. Here he makes wine for a number of clients (including Liberty's Redfin – see below) and also produce a couple of wines under his own label, S.C. Pannell.

Steve is a great guy, superb fun, clearly very passionate and very traditional in his methods – cold soaking, open top fermenters, hand plunging the cap (which we all had a go of), ageing in 1-2 year old French oak. He's the sort of good guy that you want to succeed and you know that his wines are going to be good. He also has a very fit wife, if that makes any difference.

Redfin Shiraz Grenache 2004 – this is the entry level range he makes for Liberty and a wine that we have been selling loads lately. Just under £6 retail and what you get is lovely clean ripe fruit, good structure and balance, some complexity, and a very moreish wine. The 04 has a deep ruby colour with lovely smoky dark fruit on the nose and palate. Well balanced and good length. Good. RECOMMENDED.

Redfin Shiraz Grenache 2006 – 80% shiraz, 20% grenache. Lovely juicy fruit black fruit nose and palate. Decent weight, all in balance, great wine at the price point.

S.C. Pannell Grenache Rose 2006 – pale pink colour. Delicate nose, perfumed, floral and citrus notes. Very simple and light on palate. Okay. A 2007 barrel sample (unfermented) is a bit deeper and richer, but with lovely natural acidity. Will be good.

S.C. Pannell Shiraz Grenache 2005 – co-fermented. Deep purple colour. Lovely spicy black fruit nose. Decent levels of dark fruit and spice of palate without going overboard. Very good structure, fine tannins and good acidity. Very elegant and good length. A very good wine that will improve for some years yet. However, at a rrp of £20 approx, the general consensus of the group was that this is a few quid too much.

S.C. Pannell Shiraz 2005 – deep purple in colour. Nice nose of licorice spicy black fruit. More pronounced than the blend. Nice weight on palate but very tight at present, very elegant but needs a few more years before drinking (5+). Again, whilst I want Steve to be successful in what he does, this is a hard sell for a merchant. RRP is about £26 (too high) and it's not nearly ready yet.

S.C. Pannell Nebbiolo 2006 – a variety that Steve loves. Light brick colour. Red fruit, gamey, leathery nose. Massive tannins but nice fruit coming through. Lovely weight and elegance on palate. Lots happening here but needs time. Very good.

S.C. Pannell Grenache 2006 – deep purple colour. Black fruit and spice nose. Big tannins and quite high acidity on palate masking the fruit. A keeper.

S.C. Pannell Shiraz Grenache 2006 – nice lifted forward nose, very inviting. Lovely fresh dark fruit on palate, herb notes and smokiness, great weight and structure. Nice fine grained tannic frame, good acidity, silky. Long finish. Again a long term wine. RECOMMENDED.

S.C. Pannell Shiraz 2006 – massive deep purple colour. Beautiful nose of plum, mulberry and blueberry. Lovely fresh fruit on palate framed within big silky tannins. Complex. Long. Very good but long term cellaring needed. RECOMMENDED.

Clonakilla, Canberra Hills, New South Wales

Now this isn't an area packed with wineries but it was worth the detour to see Clonakilla. I have liked their wines for a while, but this was the most impressive part of the trip for me, all of their wines shining.

The vineyard was established in 1971 by John Kirk, a Canberra based scientist (and a lovely old man now) and his fourth son, Tim, took over winemaking duties in 1996. Tim's inspiration came from a visit in 1991 to the Rhone where he was lucky enough to spend some time with Marcel Guigal and be blown away by Guigal's top single vineyard Cote Roties. Clonakilla's Shiraz Viognier is rated by Langtons as Outstanding (the top classification).

Sauvignon Semillon 2006 (not available in UK) – simple nose and palate, quite elegant although not masses going on.

Riesling 2005 (not available in UK) – very nice nose of subtle lime and floral notes. Clean, crisp acidity and a very long finish. Very good indeed.

Ballinderry 2005 (not available in UK) – blend of cab sav, merlot and cab franc). Lovely sweet fruit nose, caramel notes. Lovely weight on palate, sweet black and red fruit, chocolate, spice. Nice silky tannins, very rounded and pleasant. Decent finish. Worth getting some if you can.

Barrel samples of Viognier 2006 from different blocks – showed amazing differences between small parcels, different fermentation methods (some had whole bunches added), etc. All were utterly delicious. The viognier is originally from the Chateau Grillet clone.

Barrel samples of Hilltop Shiraz, Shiraz Viognier, Syrah – all showing superbly, again different blocks that go into the final blend showing subtly different characters. **The Syrah 2006 is only going to be a release of 250 cases some time next year and this is worth looking out for.**

Over lunch (so very little note taking as the food and wine was so good).

Viognier 2003 & 2005 from magnums – just beautiful.

Shiraz Viognier 2005 / 2003 / 2001 / 1998 – 05 powerful yet elegant; 03 – more gamey nose, still elegant & powerful; 01 magnums – very Cote Rotie like, beautiful; 1998 – lovely & fresh, elegant and gorgeous.

The blended liqueur Muscat with dessert was stunning (only sold cellar door as so little is made).

Brokenwood, Hunter Valley, New South Wales

A winery very close to my heart as it was really a short amount of time spent in The Hunter Valley in 2003, including time at Brokenwood, that convinced me that I really ought to be a part of the wine industry. And, having bought back a case of the excellent Graveyard Shiraz 2000 with me, it was from there that I discovered that Liberty Wines were the UK importer and, subsequently, found out all about the wine industry in a five minute lesson from Bruce Kendrick of Liberty. I also remember an absolutely superb lunch in 2003 at a restaurant next to Pepper Tree Wines, amongst the vines, where I had duck served with a Graveyard sauce. I think I made the right connection.

Anyway, times have changed since I last visited and Brokenwood have obviously been doing well. They've extended both the cellar door & tasting room as well as the winery. They've also increased their range to produce wines from many other areas (see tasting notes below). Whether this is a good thing or not, I'm not sure, but the Semillon and the Hunter Shiraz (esp. Graveyard) still stand out for me. The Graveyard in particular is very elegant with supple tannins and moderate alcohol which makes it particularly food friendly. A very nice happy bunch of people as well, very laid back.

The tasting started with barrel samples of:

Beechworth Chardonnay 2006 – hugely intense yellow colour. The brand new oak overpowers the fruit at the moment, far too heavy.

Forest Edge Chardonnay 2006 – from vineyards 1050m above sea level, cooler climate. Much better balance, oak more subtle and integrated, lovely fruit. Decent crisp acidity and quite long. Will be very good.

Pa's Block Shiraz 2007 (one parcel to be blended into Graveyard) – 2 weeks in oak only. Intense purple colour, sweet smoky mulberry nose & palate. Very soft, savoury with sweet fruit and spice notes. Very fresh and very long. Will spend 18 months in new oak (70% French, 30% American) before blending and bottling.

Bush block 2006 – from young vines that will later go into Graveyard. Youthful, smoky black fruit on nose and palate, some violets and mulberry. Less intense.

End Block Graveyard 2006 – lovely dark smoky fruit, savoury also. Fine grained tannins already integrated. Black smoky fruit on palate, quite savoury, violets and mocha. Earthy also. Nice weight and balance. Very good.

Way Block 2006 (McLaren Vale) – tight nose of black fruit, spice, violets, elderflower. Bigger sweeter fruit on palate, grippy tannins, nice acidity balancing palate, long. American & French oak but handles it well. Typically McLaren Vale. Very good.

Then on to the tasting proper:

Semillon 2006 – nice fruity nose of melon, apple, spice and honey. Some smokiness as well. Light and clean on palate, white fruit and some caramel hints. Moderate acidity. Well made but not overly exciting at this stage.

Semillon ILR Reserve 2001 – pale lemon in colour, still youthful. Toasty nose, almost raspberry/red fruit like. However, faint hint of corkiness on palate, which was confirmed. Apparently this was the last vintage of Semillon sealed under cork as they lost so much of this wine to cork taint and reduction. The second bottle was excellent and fresh, white fruit and citrus, great acidity, very long and toasty. **RECOMMENDED.**

Cricket Pitch White Sauvignon Semillon 2005 – pronounced nose of sweet apple and citrus fruit, almost botrytis like at the end. Good fresh fruit on palate with waxy notes and a touch of residual sugar. Nice length. Very pleasant and quaffable and described as “Lady's Beer” which I think sums it up quite nicely.

Forest Edge Chardonnay 2005 – rich nose of citrus and white stone fruit. Oak very pronounced. Weighty on palate with citrus and orange notes, nice acidity but the oak slightly overpowering the fruit. More like the old style Aussie chardonnay than the new, lighter more balanced wines.

Cricket Pitch Red 2003 – cabernet, merlot, shiraz. Medium ruby red colour. Lovely nose of cassis, blackcurrant, plum, cinnamon, sweet vanillan oak. Complex. Good weight on palate, dark fruit, chocolate, sweet spice, great balance. Fresh acidity and fine grained tannins with a little bit of grip. Decent length. Very good. **RECOMMENDED.**

Shiraz 2002 (McLaren Vale, Padthaway, Beechwood) – a blend of fruit from 3 different regions. Deep purple colour, still youthful. Lovely nose of plum, cherry, licorice, subtle oak. Beautiful and soft on palate, quite tightly structured within fine tannins, builds on the palate. Dark, spicy sweet fruit. Nice balance and long finish.

Hunter Valley Shiraz 2004 – medium intensity, ruby red/purple colour. Complex lifted nose of star anise, plum, black fruit, sweet spice, licorice. Lovely weight on palate, dark fruit, earthy, leathery, soft tannins, fresh acidity, very elegant. Good finish. Very good.

Graveyard Shiraz 2004 – deeper colour. Nose more closed and brooding. Richer on palate but very well balanced again. Tannins less integrated but still soft and dusty. Sweet fruit but savoury notes, very elegant and 12.5% alcohol. Long finish. Decent now but needs some time.

Wade Block 2 Shiraz 2004 (McLaren Vale) – 2% higher alcohol from McLaren Vale generally as it is hotter. Purple colour, opaque core. Intense nose of rich black fruit and sweet spicy oak. Big on palate but well balanced. Bigger tighter tannins, dark smoky fruit, licorice, damson, blackcurrant, tar. Good acidity. Very long. Rich and powerful but all together. Very good.

Rayner Shiraz 2004 (McLaren Vale) – deep opaque purple colour. Big juicy nose and palate of sweet black fruit, clove, licorice, vanilla. Mouth filling grainy tannins, sweet on palate but in harmony. Massive length. A bit of a blockbuster, but very good indeed. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

After a day off in Sydney, we had dinner at Wildfire overlooking the Harbour Bridge and The Opera House. All very nice. At dinner we tasted a new wine to the Liberty portfolio – Greenstone's Heathcote Shiraz 2005. I thought the wine pretty decent but, at £13.95 rrp, it is a touch overpriced. And when you learn that it is made from vines only 18 months old, it does confuse and concern.

Then off to New Zealand for 3 days.....

Ata Rangi, Martinborough

My first taste of New Zealand, a dramatic flight into Wellington to land on the runway right on the beach (pretty windy also). Then a 1 hour coach journey through the intensely green mountains to the plain at Martinborough, where Ata Rangi are.

Ata Rangi were one of the pioneering wineries in Martinborough, where pinot is the best bet in this warm micro-climate (they get tiny rainfall and therefore tiny crops from low yielding vines). Helen

Masters in a young winemaker with an eye for detail and they have 30-40 odd different pinot clones at present, which they all vinify separately before blending. They are more or less fully organic now and the wines are elegance personified.

Before a superb dinner at The Martinborough Hotel, where they matched each of Ata Rangi's range with a local dish, we did a vertical tasting of the Pinot Noir.

Pinot Noir 2000 – a good vintage sealed under cork. Light ruby colour. Pretty nose of sweet wild strawberry, redcurrant, damson, and smoky notes. Dry sweet delicate fruit on palate, fresh acidity, lovely balance. Fresh clean finish, not huge. Very charming and elegant, drink now though.

Pinot Noir 2001 – a warmer year sealed under cork. Light purple in colour, lovely pinot nose of forest fruit and strawberry, still really fresh. Very delicate and elegant on palate, fresh acidity, very little tannin. Lovely red berry fruit, slight savoury edge. Good length. Silky. RECOMMENDED.

Pinot Noir 2002 – considered a poor vintage (wet) under cork. Red/purple colour. Initially backward nose that opened up to reveal dark, more savoury smoky fruit. Tight on palate, dark red fruit, soft yet structured. Medium acidity and little bit of tannic grip, slightly more weight. Decent finish. Drink now.

Pinot Noir 2003 – small crop, good year sealed under stelvin. Light purple colour. Mulberry and damson nose, darker, more savoury. Some secondary pinot farmyard notes developing. Nice weight and balance in mouth, sweet smoky and savoury fruit. More savoury style. Good balance and decent length. Very good, will develop further.

Pinot Noir 2004 – lots of rain, but good vintage in end. Light purple colour. Slightly closed nose, cranberry notes. Tight structure, elegant, good acidity and bit of tannin. Slightly watery fruit I thought, quite savoury. Is there enough there to come through?

Pinot Noir 2005 – deep purple colour. Sweet brambly fruit and caramel notes. Beautiful black and red fruits on palate. Smoke, chocolate, touch of sweet spice. Very long finish. Excellent. RECOMMENDED.

Pinot Noir 2006 – to be bottled. Youthful purple colour. Unusual sweet leesy nose, some almost confected fruit, rhubarb and peach as well. Most strange, may have been getting tired at this point. Sweet dark smoky fruit on palate. Okay.

Delta Vineyards, Marlborough

Joint owned by David Gleave of Liberty and Matt Thomson, winemaker, Delta have vineyards on both the Marlborough flats and the hills (a site specially selected by Matt). We've found bottle variation on quite a few Pinot, strange being under stelvin, but some show really brightly and other bottles have been very uninspiring.

The tasting was conducted over a lovely picnic lunch amongst the vines.

Sauvignon Blanc 2006 – fruit from the Dillons Point area. Dry herbaceous more savoury style. Nice and clean. Decent.

Pinot Noir 2006 – simple, juicy and fresh. Low toast oak removes confected notes. Good.

Hatters Hill Pinot Noir 2005 – deeper, more serious wine. Dark fruits, spice, better structure. Good, perhaps needs a little bit more time. **RECOMMENDED.**

Tinpot Hut, Marlborough

A new project set up by Liberty and Fiona Turner, who used to work with Matt. A brilliant sauvignon was released into the UK last year (and we have done very well with it), the fruit for this coming from Fiona's own vineyards. And the idea going forward is to source the best fruit from other regions to make the best varietal expressions of each region. In many respects this idea is to compete against the Kim Crawford range.

Sauvignon Blanc 2006 – everything that decent Marlborough sauvignon should be. Packed with gooseberry, bell pepper, tomato leaf, lovely acidity, great length. The samples on the day didn't show brilliantly, but I'm quite happy keeping this one as our little secret and letting our customers enjoy the wine. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Hawkes Bay Syrah 2005 – light purple colour (pinot like). Fruity and lots of white pepper. Lovely and light on palate, very elegant. Made in a Rhoneish style, thus syrah not shiraz. If it comes in at the proposed £10-12 rrp, then this will sell. **RECOMMENDED.**

Kim Crawford, Marlborough

On to Mr Crawford's, now a huge operation, making over half a million cases of wine per annum. Much as I like many of their wines with their up front fruitiness, the company is now so massive that you can't class them as hand crafted wines. For example, we visited the Spitfire Vineyard where they make their SP (small parcel) Spitfire Sauvignon Blanc. Now "small parcel" to me seems like an acre or two; this vineyard must have been 50 acres!! Owned now by the massive Constellation Group.

Riesling SP The Museum 2005 – peachy and aromatic on nose. A bit blousy on the palate, citrus and peach. Decent length.

Chardonnay SP Gisborne 2004 – 100% US oak, full malo. Massive oaky nose. Huge oak, massive tropical fruit. Bit of a fruit bomb.

Gewurztraminer SP Gisborne 2006 – overt nose of lychee and rose petal. Big and blousy on palate, almost soapy/synthetic. Horrible. I've tasted this before and thought it half decent, but not on this occasion.

Sauvignon Blanc 2006 – massive, classic Marlborough nose. Lovely green fruit on palate, some tropical notes (passion fruit). Nice balance. Good length. Good – I like this. **RECOMMENDED.**

Sauvignon Blanc SP Dillons 2006 – green, grassy, herbaceous.

Sauvignon Blanc SP Spitfire 2006 – green bell pepper, gooseberry, tropical fruit on nose and palate. Lovely high acidity keeping fruit fresh and good balance. Really good. At about £1 more than the straight SB, this is great value, despite my earlier comments about Small Parcel. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Sauvignon Blanc SP Flowers 2006 – similar nose to Spitfire but leaner, more minerally on palate. Really long, very good again. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED** (although we don't get this in the UK).

Then a few experimental wines:

Pinot Noir SP 777 2006 – not in UK. Hand picked. Smoky, dark fruit, farm yardy nose. Same on palate. Strange. (That's what my notes say).

Pinot Noir SP 777 2006 – machine harvested parcel to compare with above. More confectioned bubble gum like nose. Simple on palate but not the strangeness of the hand picked version and more preferable.

Pinot Noir SP Mixed 2006, aged in small oak barrels – herby, spicy black fruit nose. Dark, smoky spicy fruit on palate, bit of tannin, nice acidity. Very good length smoky finish. Good.

As above, aged in larger oak barrels – pure smoky dark fruit on nose and palate. Not very complex (as smaller barrel wine was).

Also tasted a number of wines over dinner, the Pinot Noir SP Anderson 2005 being very good.

Wild Earth, Central Otago

About 40 minutes drive from Queenstown (the extreme sports capital of the world and the birth place of bungee jumping) is the absolutely stunning scenery of Central Otago. Queenstown is breathtaking enough, but this place is so beautiful it is hard to describe. Buy a postcard or look on the internet and you'll understand what I mean.

Anyway, to Wild Earth who are situated next to Felton Road. Their vines are only 6 or so years old, but these guys are doing some good things and they make great wine. They also have the most fabulous tasting room ever – a tent at the bottom of the vineyards next to a stunning river (where I spent a bit of time fishing with a beer in my hand – it was the last day of the trip).

I must admit to not making any tasting notes as the emphasis was on fun as we enjoyed a multitude of smoked goods prepared by Wild Earth's owner, Quentin. However, from memory:

Pinot Gris 2005 – 15gms or so of residual sugar. Doing well in NZ market. Well made but not my sup of tea.

Riesling 2005/2006 – both with about 25gms residual sugar but didn't seem that high because of the high acidity. Beautiful peachy aromatic fruit and we were all encouraging Liberty to bring this over the the UK as it will go down very well, especially with ladies I think. **RECOMMENDED.**

Pinot Noir 2004 – which we sell very well through the shop. Still beautiful although entering the secondary farmyard stage of it's life. Very complex, well balanced, delicious. **RECOMMENDED.**

Pinot Noir 2005 – richer, deeper, even more complex from vines with another year's age on them. A really serious wine and this will enhance their ever growing reputation. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

So, after 16 days away, 13 or so flights, thousands of miles travelled, a few wines sampled, a few more drunk, many late nights and early mornings, a lot learned and some good friends made, it's back to reality.

There are some truly great wines made in Australia and New Zealand. Both are still relatively young wine producing countries and, whilst they have come a long way, there is still much to learn. The more clearly defined focus on regionality and terroir is good to see; the added emphasis on elegance, structure and balance rather than sunshine in a glass is also good; screwcaps are getting better all the time (including screwcaps that allow a little bit of oxygen through); the people involved are passionate and knowledgeable, and mostly very nice people; and there's still lots of experimentation going on – new varieties, new regions, new processes. It's great for us and great for the consumer.