

(one bottle)

2006 SG PANNELL NEBBIOLO

A Galápagos finch of a wine

YES, THIS IS the second Australian bottle in succession. Why? I'm living in Australia for 15 months, surveying the land, the sky, and the vineyards that they nourish. I've rarely tasted so much wine on a weekly basis over a sustained period. Almost all of it, logically enough, is from Australia. To look elsewhere just now would be irrational and discourteous—though my previous life as a wine nomad will be resumed in an issue or two.

But which Australian wine? Australia's success and recent growth have made the scene seem a settled one: contented vinous pastoralists herding vast flocks of bottles off to the grateful north. Now the talk is of crisis. The transhumance has slowed; the north is less grateful than it was. The shepherds are leaning on their crooks and examining the lines in their work-hardened hands. Everything is changing, as it always does. The unresponsive risk extinction. Adapt and survive.

This bottle represents a suite of adaptations. It's a kind of Galápagos finch among Australian wines—a beautiful and thought-provoking bottle, too.

The roots of Australia's modern wine industry lay in 60 years of fortified-wine production; the pendulum swung toward table wines only in 1968. Australia has the oldest vines in the world, and whenever you see them on a label, you know that in most cases they passed six sun-baked decades or more producing fortified wines. Then market tastes changed. A more sophisticated Australia, peopled by southern European rather than British émigrés, wanted to drink wine and not beer. The north, too, opened to Australia's table wines, polished as they were by technical advances. Trade barriers fell; demand soared; the vineyards obliged.

They were, though, the same vineyards and, for red wines, often the same varieties. Effortless sweet richness was the old fortified desideratum; now it had to be rendered into table wine, and that often required "artifact" (lots of oak) and "cool climate in a bag" (sometimes copious added acidity). The results are striking and have proved popular, though they struggle for subtlety or natural



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articulation. It was the search for those qualities that led to the development of newer growing regions, either previously unplanted or where promising 19th-century origins had declined into a 20th-century dark age, occluded by fortification. Many began as authentically cool climates, though climate change can make the term seem inadequate now.

We're in the middle of this story. The older and warmer regions, I suspect, merit later-ripening varieties than the ones that linger on there; and the newer regions need fine-tuning to a changing climate and to deepening understanding of their terroirs. The Adelaide Hills, for example, was pioneered as an ultra-cool source of sparkling-wine material and as a place to chase the sirens of Burgundy. Now it makes creditable Nebbiolo.

To be fair, it's a vast and parcelated area. Some of Australia's best sparkling wines, Chardonnays, and Pinots still find their backbone in Piccadilly, a mere glide or two from the 727m (2,385ft) summit of Mount Lofty, whereas the grapes for this wine ripen at Gumeracha, a warmer prospect at 370–390m (1,215–1,280ft). Conditions are dissimilar to those of Piedmont; the air is less humid, the soils less nutritious, the plants less vigorous. But Nebbiolo has been a rather grumpy traveler, showing little of its sub-alpine grandeur in California or Argentina; here, it smells and tastes like itself.

The wine is emblematic in another way, too. It's made by Steve Pannell, wayward son of West Australian pioneers Bill and Sandra Pannell, founders of Moss Wood and today fully signed-up Pinotphiles pursuing sirens of their own at Picardy in the Great Southern's Pemberton (with Steve's brother Dan). Steve's winemaking intelligence saw him rise to the role of chief red-wine maker for Hardy's. He eventually left because Hardy's wouldn't let him go to Italy (he later spent three months working with Aldo Vajra); he worked in Bordeaux and Burgundy in the 1990s and, more recently, in Argentina, Priorat, and Monsant. That's Australia's present, too. Its most thought-provoking wines are made by the wayward and dissatisfied, those synthesizing domestic experience with work overseas to try to read the mysteries hidden inside each new (and usually challenging) Australian vintage without recourse to the fixes of the past.

This wine, which comes from Frank Baldasso's Protero vineyard, was hand-harvested in late April and had an 18-day stint in open fermenters before spending 28 months in used 500-liter puncheons. (Nowadays it's still more Piedmontese, the 2009 lying 77 days with its skins.) It's gratifyingly pale, with graceful and teasing scents. It's the kind of wine where everyone would nose out a different allusion, but black tea leaf, elderberry, and violet might all feature. The palate seems smooth, light, and vivid as you launch into it, then the tannins thicken and you realize happily that it's going to detain you longer than you first thought. It behaves like Nebbiolo, in sum; there's even a little tar-like earth lurking behind what may have smelled like elderberries but tastes more like redcurrants. A swallow—and there's still perfume on your tongue. The fruit architecture isn't yet as cavern-like as it can be when this grape reaches its apogee, but the vines were only planted in 1999. It doesn't quite achieve cragginess; some may be grateful for that. It's lingeringly dry, though; the acids support the tannic structure, but unstrenuously and unjarringly. Bravo! Pure wine for food—and for thought. ■

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