

denoted by small production and the winemaker's passion

boutique cab

bring an appreciation for hand-crafted wine and a glass

BY TIM A. RUTHERFORD

An economist once extolled the virtue of being a “boutique” style business. “In the unending cycle of economic ups and downs, it is the boutique business -- one driven by minimal sales requirements, passion and single-minded control -- that will survive and continue to thrive.”

Proprietors of boutique wineries know the business model well -- and count on legions of raving fans to snatch up the juicy, delicious wines with the anticipation of a bored school boy awaiting the day's last bell.

The hand-sell nature of these wines can be a challenge for retailers, and there are plenty to choose from. In California alone, there are more than 450 wineries that produce less than 5,000 cases per year. Many of those are smaller still, with annual output amounting to less than 1,000 cases.

But this journey doesn't begin in California, it begins on a lengthy flight across the Pacific Ocean to the land down under, mysterious and alluring Australia.

There isn't a wine drinker around who hasn't sampled Aussie wines from fertile Barossa and Adelaide regions. Victoria, situated on the continent's most southeastern corner, also produces serious wines and does so with vastly different weather than neighboring regions.

Unlike most of Australia's mainland regions, Victoria's mountains run east to west, creating a barrier that encourages



When compared to better known Australian vineyard properties and the hard scrabble soils that taunt vines to find life, the vineyards of Shinas Estate near Muldrin, Victoria, is a lush, rolling landscape.

the maritime influence caused by converging Pacific and Indian oceans to moderate the climate.

Major Victoria cities like Melbourne and Sydney are most familiar to U.S. wine drinkers, but the 30,000 people who call Mildura home know it as Victoria's wine country -- where 80 percent of the state's wine grapes are grown.

Wine-making grapes had been planted since 1898 on the land where George Shinas' family migrated to from Greece in the 1950s. At first, the family made wine for their own consumption -- with a few bottles going as treasured gifts to

neighbors. Soon, those neighbors, as well as area restaurants and wine merchants were clamoring for the Shinas' family wines.

In 2002 Shinas Estate was formed to begin commercial production from the family's land nestled along the Murray River, in the heart of the Mildura Murray Darling, Australia's second-largest wine growing region.

George, a former judge in Mildura, called upon common courtroom terms to name the wines: The Guilty Shiraz, The Innocent Viognier and The Verdict Cabernet Sauvignon. The Executioner red

blend's 360 cases rarely see U.S. soil. A new label, Sweet Justice (likely to be a Cabernet/Shiraz blend) is expected to hit shelves in 2012.

The Verdict, like all Shinas Estate wines, are easy to spy on the shelf -- each is marked with a dark and mysterious label. But it is the rich, elegant body of The Verdict that sentences boutique wine fans to a harbor a lifelong affinity for this velvety Shinas Estate Cabernet.

The Mediterranean-like weather and soft alluvial soils over sandstone lay the terroir's foundation. That, combined with a classic wine making philosophy insure The Verdict pleases every juror.

According to the estate's website, “Our winemaking style is a very hands off approach. We prefer to do our work in the vineyard, harvest healthy fruit and do a little as possible in the winery.”

We've all heard that message before -- and every time it's repeated, it's in regard to a memorable wine.

SAVANNAHFOODIE.COM
“BEST BUY”



The juice gets five days of skin contact and then a 30 month slumber in French oak. It is bottled unfined.

Expect a dark plum color in the glass and a noseful of ripe berry, vanilla and well worn leather.

There's no doubt that ripe, dark cherry and black fruits envelope the palate, but I relished the spicier notes that came from hints of biting licorice and a touch of tangy mint.

This is a remarkably enjoyable wine that drinks beautifully right from first opening, but benefits from some time to breath. The Verdict is truly a hand-crafted wine that displays the care it gets from vineyard to bottle in every sip. I'll be on the lookout for other Shinas Estate wines, as well as others from the Mildura region.

At around \$21.99, The Verdict easily earns Savannahfoodie.com's “Best Buy” designation for its elegance, accessibility and value -- it drinks far bigger than its price tag.



The Mildura Murray Darling is the second largest wine region in Australia. It produces more than 130,000 tons annually of Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon. More Chardonnay is produced in the Murray Darling region than anywhere else in Australia. Depending on seasonal variations, it contributes up to about 25 percent of the national crush.

More Boutique Wines

Spring Valley Vineyards
2008 Uriah Merlot

Six generations of the Corkrum family have grown wheat on the rolling hills of Washington State.



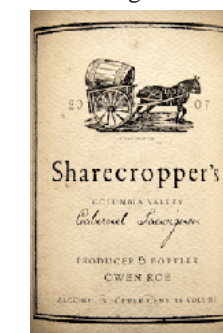
That impressive family heritage added a branch with the addition of wine grapes in 1993 -- and today Spring Valley Vineyard produces several small batch wines that epitomize the best of Washington's wine making scene.

From this very plot specific vineyard. I was most impressed with Uriah, a Merlot blend with splashes of Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec.

Aromas are complex and ever evolving -- what a fun noseful of wine! On the palate, anticipate bright acid and ripe cherry flavors. Tannins are refined and nicely balanced -- leading to a lingering finish that is long, rich and stroked with notes of roasted coffee. About \$50.

Owen Roe 2008
Sharecropper's
Cabernet Sauvignon

These folks have been making small quantities of wine since 1999 -- sourcing mostly from the Columbia Valley of Washington State. Carefully managed aging in mostly French oak insures firm tannin development; fastidious handling guarantees enough tactility to brand these wines are handmade.



Owen Roe 2008 Sharecropper's Cabernet Sauvignon has a nose ripe with blueberries, black currants, dark cherries and wild strawberries. A nice long finish lingers with flavors of licorice, olives and cedar. With all that darkness you might expect Sharecropper to be bold, even muscular -- but it's not. Sharecropper's generously overdelivers for the price -- I found mine for around \$20.