

Delivering the goods: wines from Australia's Tumbarumba

How this highly distinctive grape-growing region is seeking to bounce back from the bushfires

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It all started with the recent terrible bushfires in Australia. The worst-affected wine regions were the Adelaide Hills, Kangaroo Island off the South Australian coast and the delightfully named Tumbarumba in the hills halfway between Melbourne and Sydney. In one of my weekly newsletters in January, I urged wine drinkers to support the Australian wine industry by buying its produce.

The response of Canberra wine merchant and Tumbarumba vineyard owner Bill Mason was to offer to assemble a collection of recently released Tumbarumba wines for me to taste, hoping to increase recognition of this highly distinctive grape-growing region.

He persuaded Australia Post to cover shipping costs and invited local producers to submit samples, which were vetted by some of the region's most experienced tasters.

The result was the arrival of 33 bottles at my King's Cross flat in red and white Australia Post two-packs. (In the past few years, there have been leaps and bounds in designing secure and recyclable cardboard packaging for wine bottles, I'm delighted to report. Farewell polystyrene.)

All this effort was not in vain because I was hugely impressed by some of the wines, especially the Chardonnays. Australia has a way with 21st-century Chardonnay in general — by which I mean they are so much slimmer than the notoriously flabby Chardonnays of the Bridget Jones era — but some can be a bit too austere and fruitless.

The best of these Tumbarumba Chardonnays were just right: whistle-clean, well-constructed and packed full of interesting, savoury flavour. Oh, and cheaper than comparable white burgundy.

Tumbarumba is in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales, whose highest peak, Mount Kosciuszko, is Australia's highest mountain. It's a small, fairly young wine region. Only about 300ha of vines are planted, mostly at elevations of between 550m and 800m — much higher than most European vineyards. Vineyards have to face north to stand a chance of ripening.

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The climate may be very similar to that of Champagne and Burgundy — with a bit more brilliant sunlight and cooler nights — but Tumbarumba is very different from any European

wine region I can think of in that so much of its produce is plundered by raiding parties from outside the region.

The first two commercial vineyards were planted in 1981. Such was the obvious potential of the region that in 1992 a workshop was held by the agriculture ministry and one of Australia's biggest wine companies, then called Southcorp, to encourage more vine planting.

The result was a small group of family-owned grape growers with a series of supply contracts to big wine companies outside the region, including the two that have dominated the Australian wine industry for so long — now called Treasury Wine Estates (once Southcorp, with such brands as Penfolds) and Accolade (Hardys etc). They recognised the unusual and refreshing nature of grapes from this relatively cool, wet region.

But many of these contracts came up for renewal in the mid-2000s when Australian wine was suffering one of its periodic existential crises. There was a grape glut throughout the country, so the two big companies cut their investments in this part of it, did not renew their contracts and now simply buy grapes as and when.

The region is cool enough to be suitable for growing grapes for sparkling wine, and it was Hardys' celebrated sparkling winemaker Ed Carr who led the company to Tumbarumba in the mid-1990s.

My shipment contained a bottle of his stunning 2011 traditional-method sparkling Chardonnay, grown in Courabyra vineyard. Early 21st-century vintages of the company's top Chardonnay, Eileen Hardy, had a dollop of Tumbarumba fruit in them.

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As for its big rivals, Penfolds' luxuriously priced Chardonnay Yattarna (almost £100 a bottle) has regularly contained a portion of Tumbarumba fruit since 1996. Penfolds Bin 311 (closer to £24) was made exclusively of Tumbarumba grapes from 2005 to 2016.

From 2017, other produce from cool regions was admitted into the blend but the 2019 vintage of Penfolds' Cellar Reserve single-vineyard Chardonnay is all from Tumbarumba.

These Chardonnays have been the highest-profile ambassadors for Tumbarumba's charms, but the region also grows other grape varieties: particularly the fashionable Pinot Noir, but also Pinot Gris, Sauvignon Blanc, Prosecco (renamed Glera by the Italians), Riesling, Pinot Meunier, Gamay and even the Grüner Veltliner of Austria.

Alex McKay was once Hardys' man in Tumbarumba and now runs Collector Wines, producers of particularly fine Tumbarumba Chardonnay. He reckons almost a third of Tumbarumba's grapes are bought to add a little finesse to blends based on the produce of workhorse vines in Riverina in the hot interior to the north-west, but the majority of fruit finds its way into wines labelled Tumbarumba.

Many are trucked to wineries outside the region, in the wine district around Canberra, Riverina or even the Hunter Valley, well to the north of Sydney.

After the departure of the two big companies, McWilliams of Riverina became the biggest buyers of Tumbarumba fruit and were still making quite a range of Tumbarumba wines until they went into administration in January.

McWilliams' head winemaker Jim Brayne was particularly keen on Tumbarumba and his son Adrian runs the region's only winery, processing about a sixth of all of the grapes.

Adrian was particularly badly hit by the fires on New Year's Eve and lost both his home and the vineyards that produce grapes for his own label, Obsession, whose 2018 was my favourite Tumbarumba Pinot Noir. It will probably be another five years before these burnt vineyards are able to produce another crop.

The winery was not too badly burnt and should be able to process the grapes grown by his clients, but most of them had no crop at all this year, such were the effects of both fire and smoke on the grapes. Tumbarumba really does deserve to be recognised as more than a provider of an ingredient in a big company's blend.

This may be the first time I have written a profile of a wine region without ever having been there. A sign of things to come perhaps?

Treats from Tumbarumba

I scored all of these at least 17 out of 20, a very high score for me. I gave only two of the 33 wines I tasted less than a very respectable 16.

- Courabyra 805 2011 sparkling wine
- Kosciuszko Chardonnay 2018
- Mada Chardonnay 2018
- Coppabella, Sirius Chardonnay 2018
- Collector Wines, Tiger Tiger Chardonnay 2017 and 2016
- Obsession Pinot Noir 2018
- Alas, none of these wines are currently available in the UK, but many UK wine merchants list Tumbarumba wines. The only examples that seem to reach the US are Penfolds Bin 311 and Eden Road Chardonnay.