



Wine

BY MICHAEL COOPER

Que syrah syrah

New Zealand's syrahs make a splash across the Tasman.

New Zealand and Australian wines complement each other, rather than compete directly – or so it is often claimed. New Zealand is a spring of crisp, cool-climate white wines and relatively light reds made from pinot noir, while Australia's abundant heat and sunshine yield deliciously easy-drinking, ripe, well-rounded chardonnays and powerful, rich shiraz-based reds.

Shiraz – identical to the traditional syrah variety of the Rhône Valley, famous for Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie – was the foundation on which the Hunter Valley, Barossa Valley and Coonawarra regions built their early red-wine reputations. Today's top models are recognised as Australia's greatest gifts to the wine world.

However, the cosy idea that Australian shiraz is far superior to New Zealand's, and that the Aussies can't get within cooee of us with sauvignon blanc, is now seriously under threat. Australia's sauvignon blancs sometimes beat New Zealand's on the world stage, and New Zealand's syrahs are staging similarly dramatic upsets.

For *Winestate** magazine's Wine of the Year Awards 2008, held in Adelaide, three Australian judges retasted all 115 of the year's 5- and 4½-star shirazes and syrahs. "These wines are becoming more refined and elegant," noted chief judge Stephen John. I wonder why?

Scarpantoni Estate Block 3 McLaren Vale Shiraz 2006 won the top gong, but the runner-up trophy went to Craggy Range Le Sol 2006, with Villa Maria Cellar Selection Syrah 2006 claiming third. Of the top six shirazes or syrahs of the year, three flowed from Hawke's Bay.

Australia's greatest shirazes, such as Penfolds Grange, offer bottomless depth of cassis, plum and black-pepper flavours. New Zealand was long seen as too cool for

the noble French variety, but the wines that have emerged over the past decade from warm low-vigour sites have been unexpectedly classy.

Two-thirds of the country's vines are clustered in Hawke's Bay, but syrah is also expanding swiftly in Auckland and Northland. Top labels include Bilancia la collina, Te Mata Bullnose, Mills Reef Elspeth, Stonecroft, Passage Rock, Craggy Range Le Sol, Trinity Hill Homage and Vidal Reserve.

Under \$20

Penfolds Thomas Hyland Shiraz 2006

★★★★

Powerful South Australian red with substantial body, bold youthful plum/spice flavours and a creamy-smooth, rich finish. A bargain at \$19.

Under \$30

Pepperjack Barossa Shiraz 2007

★★★★★

For fans of big Aussie reds, this is a muscular yet silky-smooth wine with plummy, spicy flavours, deliciously ripe, rich and rounded. \$23

Villa Maria Cellar Selection Hawke's Bay Syrah 2007 ★★★★★

Densely coloured, seductively smooth blend of syrah (97%) and viognier, which accentuates syrah's floral notes. Strong, ripe blackcurrant and pepper flavours, with gentle tannins giving a deliciously soft texture. \$29.99

Babich Winemakers Reserve Hawke's Bay Syrah 2007 ★★★★★

Grown in the Gimblett Gravels, this is the best vintage yet. Dark and packed with ripe plum/spice flavours, it has earthy, savoury notes adding complexity and a rich, smooth finish. \$25

*Michael Cooper is the New Zealand editor of *Winestate*.

Man O' War Waiheke Island Syrah 2007

★★★★★

Grown at the eastern end of the island, this wine is drinking well now. Rich, vibrant and flowing, it offers deep plum and black-pepper flavours, with gentle tannins and a subtle twist of oak. \$27

Over \$30

Craggy Range Block 14 Gimblett Gravels Vineyard Syrah 2007 ★★★★★

This highly concentrated Hawke's Bay red is fragrant and rich, with fresh, vibrant, blackcurrant and spice flavours, a seasoning of toasty French oak and ripe, supple tannins. It's still youthful, but already delicious. \$37.95

Mills Reef Elspeth Syrah 2007 ★★★★★

Highly refined, this is a classic Hawke's Bay red, grown in the Gimblett Gravels. Concentrated but not heavy, firm but not grippy, it offers a lovely array of blackcurrant, plum, black-pepper and slight licorice flavours. \$40

Contour Estate Reserve Syrah 2007

★★★★★

This is a classy Matakana red from a new syrah specialist. Full-coloured, it is highly fragrant, with ripe, plummy, peppery flavours, showing good complexity and density. \$38 ■

Wine of the week

Selaks The Favourite Hawke's Bay Syrah 2007 ★★★★★

Enticingly fragrant, with a strong surge of plum and black-pepper flavours, earthy, savoury notes adding complexity, and a rich, well-rounded finish. Top value at \$21.

