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Western Australia wins by a Nose

Most of the Australian wines that you know and love are made in a relatively small corner of that vast territory. Practically all the principal wine areas are clustered down near the south, and south east - around the collar, if you imagine the map to resemble the head of a Scottish terrier. Among the few exceptions you'll see on the shelves here are the handful coming in from the south westernmost tip, or the snout of the small dog.

Western Australia is home to one of the world's newest winegrowing areas. It all started for WA with a government study in 1965 led by agronomist John Gladstone and viticulturalist Professor Harold Olmo. They declared the forest and dairy-land an hour south of Perth to be ideal for winegrowing, comparable to Bordeaux in terms of soil and climate.

The clay, and particularly the topping of free - draining granite and limestone gravel, certainly favoured vines. But it's the maritime climate - wet winter and sunny summer moderated by the seas on two sides - that makes Western Australia so special. The Indian Ocean's dampening effect on temperature extremes in WA means that the region's winemaking is more like making a casserole than the flash-frying rush to ripeness of hotter areas.

The final ingredient is people: the vigneron of Western Australia (such as Leeuwin Estate and Peel Estate) have been busily making a name for themselves in their own idiosyncratic way. Forty years after Gladstone and Olmo's eureka moment, there are only some 70 vineyards there, collectively accounting for less than 1% of Australia's wine output, but about 10% of the country's upmarket premium-priced wines.

Recently I was at a tasting through the portfolio of wine importers Febvre. Ricocheting from one well chosen vintage to another, I was stopped in my tracks by my first sniff of a Western Australian wine.

This turned out to be the entry level white from Clairault Estate. The feeling that I was dealing with something of superlative quality was sustained right through the range, reds and white. We'll look at these in more detail, but I'd sum up the entire range by saying that these are gourmet wines you should savour slowly.

What's in the bottle is really the only thing that should matter, but I admit there is some extra charm in the discovery that the people behind Clairault wines are latter-day wine geese: Bill Martin emigrated from Athlone in 1974 and in 1999, along with his wife Ena and their sons Shane, Conor and Brian, bought the vineyard in Wilyabrup.

They've been building up Clairault ever since. A key step was head hunting winemaker Will Shields from the starry Vasse Felix three years back. The Martins have also greatly expanded production but are taking particular care with vine management. Clairault employs 'low intervention' methods and aims to be 100% chemically-free in three years.

Wine tourism is on the up in the area, and the Martins are developing a spa hotel around their existing cellar door restaurant. So pause for a moment and weep with me, Irish drinkers: consider that gorgeous premium chardonnay, prettily catching the light as the sun goes down over the Indian Ocean. And here at the cellar restaurant you've selected that bottle from a list which ranges in price between €13 and €36.....In the meantime, let's look at some bottles from Clairault.

GRAPEVINE

Clairault Swagman's Sauvignon Semillon 2005

When I say this delicious wine is rich I mean just that, and not fat, which wouldn't suit the blend. Rather, this is about acidic lime and vegetal notes in harmony with warmer honeyed aromas and flavours. It is really good value.

Clairault Chardonnay 2004

It's hard to pick just one, but this bottle is my quality/price winner for its committed aromatic intensity leading to complex layers of flavour (from banana on toast to lovely cinnamon spice), and its peaches-and-cream textures.

Clairault Swagman's Cabernet Merlot 2002

Gluggable and all as this is, the entry level Clairault red tips you off to the winery's serious intent as it unveils layer after layer of dark berries and polished wood spice. Again fantastic value which really puts a challenge up to Bordeaux.

Clairault Cabernet Sauvignon 2002

Like a definition of why good wine matters, this traces out a beautiful arc of flavour and texture with a parade of berries in step with the subtle svelte tannins and vanilla spice it develops in its long 18 months in French oak.