



BRIGHT LIGHTS PIERCE THE GLOOM

The year in New South Wales, reviewed by Winsor Dobbin

IN A YEAR in which much doom and gloom surrounded the wine industry, New South Wales producers still found much to be optimistic about during 2009. After being hit by drought in 2007 and heavy rain in 2008, when red grapes were all but wiped out, Hunter Valley winemakers were delighted with better results in 2009 with whites, particularly semillon, chardonnay and verdelho, of stellar quality - and reds picked before the heavy rain in mid-February also look good.

The Canberra district reported an excellent year for both reds and whites, Mudjee had a vintage that should produce very good reds and the Southern Highlands also reported a great vintage.

Orange winemakers were celebrating a second excellent vintage in a row. "I never expected the 2009 vintage to surpass the quality of 2008 but it has," said Printhe winemaker Drew Tuckwell. "It is a real privilege to have two great vintages back to back. Someone must be smiling on us."

Mudjee, a region better known for reds than whites, produced some outstanding '09 rieslings from higher-altitude vineyards, with Thistle Hill and Robert Stein both winning several awards for their efforts. "The riesling vines really struggle here," said Robert Stein winemaker Jacob Stein. "They sit at an altitude of 550 metres, which is a great altitude for riesling to retain its natural acidity and flavour. The soil is hard quartz and shale, making it difficult for the vines to establish their root systems. The pay-off is the great fruit intensity we are seeing in the grapes. I think the best of Mudjee whites is yet to come."

David Lowe of Lowe Family Wines is similarly positive. "A wide range of climatic and environmental conditions means many different varieties and complex flavours can be found in a relatively small region like Mudjee," he said.

Things were less rosy in the Riverina, where February heat had an impact on the quality of fruit from the 2009 harvest. Yields would have been reduced if not for new plantings.

In Cowra, growers reported an average to below-average size crop, according to Jason O'Dea of Windowrie Estate. "The white varieties ripened early and evenly, with wineries reporting good varietal expression, with semillon, chardonnay and verdelho looking very good from a quality perspective. Red varieties produced small berries due to the season but growers reported above-average colour intensity and great depth of flavour in shiraz, cabernet and merlot."

Tom Ward from Swinging Bridge Estate at Canowindra reported: "The highlights were probably shiraz and cabernet sauvignon, which held on in the heat better, while the lowlights were anything that ripened during the heatwave."

Industry commentator David Cumming, of marketing company Define Wine, said wines from Orange were improving exponentially with winemakers like Drew Tuckwell, Phil Kerney (Ross Hill) and Philip Shaw working in the region, and predicts, "Mudjee will make another resurgence with the likes of Jacob Stein, the Oatley family and di Lusso leading the way."

The Oatley family underlined their commitment to the Mudjee region in October, when they repurchased the historic Cumbandry vineyards from Foster's. The vineyards were originally part of the Rosemount wine group founded by Oatley in 1969 and were sold to Foster's in 2002.

A major focus of the New South Wales Wine Industry Association throughout the year was spreading the message about the variety of styles and many different terroirs within the state.

"There was definite focus on getting out the message that New South Wales offers a wide range of wine styles - and that wine grapes are produced from virtually all over the state," said the association's promotions manager, Mike O'Malley.

The regions also did their best to lift their profiles - particularly in the major market of Sydney - with the Hunter, Orange, Mudjee and Canberra regions all holding regular festivals and tastings in the city. The results of the NSW Wine Awards emphasised that message, with the results hailed as "a celebration of the small, new and unique, with boutique producers, emerging wine regions and alternative varietals dominating".

The NSW Top 40 included wines made from riesling, sauvignon blanc, viognier, pinot gris, nebbiolo and rondinella corvina, along with more traditional varieties, and emerging regions Canberra, Tumbarumba, Hilltops and Orange took seven of the 12 trophies. The NSW Wine of the Year was Brokenwood's 2007 Forest Edge Chardonnay, made by a Hunter winery from Orange fruit by Iain Riggs and PJ Charteris.

Wine tourism remained a major focus of the industry with winery restaurants doing extremely well throughout the state. Rock Restaurant, at Poole's Rock Winery, Pokolbin, was awarded two hats in the 2010 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* for the second year running and was one of only two restaurants outside Sydney to get that status. "We pride ourselves on providing a sophisticated, fine dining experience for food and wine lovers visiting the Hunter Valley," said chef and co-owner Andrew Clarke.

Orange's Union Bank Wine Bar won the award for Best Regional Wine List in the *Good Food Guide* awards. The venue is Orange's food and wine hub, with a wine list focusing on local labels and drawing from over 600 wines hand-selected by Nick Butler.

There was sad news in the Hunter, with regional wine pioneer and legendary bon vivant Max Lake dying in April at the age of 84, while October saw the death of 88-year-old Filippo Casella, the founder of Casella Wines - home of the Yellow Tail brand. The Sicilian-born grapegrower and winemaker launched Yellow Tail in 2001 and the brand now sells 12 million cases annually.

The most heart-warming story was the return to the Drayton's winery of young winemaker William Rikard-Bell, who suffered burns to 70 per cent of his body in the explosion that killed Trevor Drayton and winery worker Eddie Orgo in 2008. He has made a quite remarkable recovery, married long-time girlfriend Kimberley Booker and is now the senior winemaker at Drayton's.