



## Golf and Wine in Australia - by John Dunn

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There can be no doubt a relationship exists between golf and wine when the game's oldest and most coveted prize is the Claret Jug. In 1872, the jug replaced a belt as the Open Championship trophy to honor the old Scottish tradition of playing golf matches for bottles of claret. Today golfers are more likely to wager pints of beer than bottles of wine, yet it is still easy to draw parallels between the game and the grape. They are both catalysts for forging relationships and creating memories. They offer pleasures that are immediate, yet grow richer with time, and they inspire a devotion among their followers that borders on fanaticism. Connoisseurs of golf and wine travel the world in pursuit of their pastimes and given the affluence and sophistication of these two overlapping lifestyles, it is not uncommon to be passionate about both.

Enjoying golf and wine together can be as simple as sharing a bottle with friends after the round. But the great golf courses and great wineries of the world are rarely found in close proximity, so a traveler often faces the choice of one activity or the other. Golfers make their pilgrimages to Scotland and Ireland and wine enthusiasts to France and Italy. Yet half a world away, Australia has quietly emerged as the place to enjoy the best of both.

To play each of the top courses in Australia one must visit Sydney, home of the New South Wales Golf Club, and Adelaide, home of the Royal Adelaide Golf Club. Fortunately, each of these cities also has its attendant wine region -- Sydney, the Hunter Valley, and Adelaide, the Barossa Valley. And elsewhere in Australia, the Melbourne Sandbelt and the Yarra Valley offer arguably the finest combination of golf and wine in the world.

With a pair of architectural icons in the Opera House and the Harbor Bridge, a massive, meandering, fjord-like harbor and stunning ocean beaches, Sydney is one of the world's most awe inspiring cities. American visitors will find Sydney reminiscent of San Francisco with sailboats plying the waters beneath the Harbor Bridge and ferries zigzagging back and forth from the city center to the Sausalito-like northern suburbs. Yet any comparisons to San Francisco will be forgotten as soon as a toe is placed in the turquoise water, for Sydney is not only blessed with countless pink sand beaches, but the water is also luxuriously swim able with temperatures hovering in the high seventies for most of the year.



The golf options around town begin and end with **New South Wales** - a world-class links, and surprisingly, Australia's only seaside course of any real significance. New South Wales possesses two essential ingredients: genuine architectural sophistication-in this case the expertise of Dr. Alister MacKenzie's artful hand -- and a location of rare beauty. The routing follows rolling sand hills down to the edge of the Pacific, then climbs the rocky headlands above Botany Bay and all the while the golfer is exposed to the wind at a dizzying variety of angles. The wind and the pitching terrain are challenge enough in themselves, but when the insidious, gorse-like bottle brush is added to the mix, the course becomes a merciless taskmaster. Yet even under the most difficult conditions there are plenty of opportunities for heroic play and the golfer is never without hope of regaining his dignity before the last putt is holed.

The only problem with New South Wales is that it renders the three other leading courses in Sydney -- **The Australian, The Lakes, and Royal Sydney** -- distant also-rans. Though they each have their merits, it would be difficult to justify sacrificing even one round at New South Wales to play any of the three. In fact, it is so good

**Tim Lapage** • Independent Safari Consultant

P.O. Box 680098, Park City, UT 84068 • 435.649.4655 • [safari@safariexperts.com](mailto:safari@safariexperts.com) • [www.safariexperts.com](http://www.safariexperts.com)

that one might gladly fly halfway around the world just to spend four nights in Sydney and four days doing battle on the bluffs above Botany Bay.



The Hunter Valley, located two hours north of Sydney at the base of the Brokenback Mountains, is Australia's oldest wine region. It is a tribute to the valley's long standing tradition that, in 1855, one of the Hunter's sparkling wines made it to the table of Napoleon III and was declared to have "a bouquet, body and flavor equal to the finest champagnes." Today, Hunter Valley vigneronns have equaled the French again, this time with the Rhone Valley variety syrah. The Australian version of this robust grape is known as shiraz and as the different name suggests, Aussies have embraced it as their own. Hunter Valley shiraz in particular exhibits characteristics that are unique to its region,

namely gamy and spicy flavors that intensify with age. Even among the many bold Australian reds, Hunter wines are known to be big and earthy with a chewy texture.

Semillon also exemplifies the Hunter Valley's "terroir." Hunter unoaked semillon is a local specialty fermented in steel containers. Free from the influence of the wood, the grape's natural flavor is allowed to shine. The classic Hunter semillons are lean and grassy in their youth, but mature into rich, creamy wines after eight to 10 years in the bottle. Semillon also blends well with sauvignon blanc and chardonnay to produce crisp refreshing wines with subtle hints of melon and citrus. The best of Hunter shiraz includes Brokenwood Graveyard, Brokenwood Rayner, Bimbadgen Estate Signature, Tyrell's Vat 9, Tyrell's Reserve Brokenback, Rothbury Black Label and Mcguigan Personal Reserve. The finest Hunter semillons include Tyrell's Vat 1, Mcguigan Bin 9000, Rothbury Black Label, Brokenwood ILR Reserve and Mcwilliams Mount Pleasant Elizabeth.

As for golf in the area, there is The Vintage, a slick new course from Greg Norman that showcases the White Shark's talent for design, in particular his penchant for creating difficulty.

## South Australia

Most of the tourist traffic through Adelaide is headed for the wine growing Barossa and Clare valleys, but those who pause for a moment will discover a friendly and laid back city. For golfers, **Royal Adelaide Golf Club** is reason enough to stop. As one of the most distinguished clubs in Oz, Royal Adelaide was fortunately included among Dr. MacKenzie's many house calls in 1926. The course's rich architectural value is comparable to Melbourne's top tier, and it is long and strong enough to host Australia's elite amateur and professional championships.

The Barossa Valley has a unique history among the Australian colonies. It was originally established by the English as a place for the working classes to escape central and northern Europe. Lutherans fleeing persecution in Germany began to arrive in the 1840s and they brought with them a tradition of wine making dating back to the 12th century. Having honed their skills in the cold, unpredictable northern climes, they were undoubtedly elated by the ideal growing conditions in their new home and wasted no time in planting the vines they had brought with them from Europe. In addition to the many quaint hamlets, stone churches and country farms, their legacy is an abundance of very old vines -- particularly shiraz -- many of which are over 100 years old.



Though it is only in the last 20 years that Australia has been recognized internationally as a major producer of fine table wine, it is the presence of these old vines and the persistence of winemakers through many years of low demand that distinguishes Australia from New World wine producers like Chile, Argentina and the United States. In the 1950s Max Schubert sparked a revolution in the Australian wine industry when, employing techniques he learned on a visit to Bordeaux, he was able to harness the intense plum and berry character of these old, low-yielding shiraz vines. The wine he created, Penfolds Grange Hermitage (today known simply as Penfolds Grange) put the Barossa Valley and Australia on the map and remains one of the world's most sought

after wines. Other fine examples of Barossa shiraz include Henschke Hill of Grace, St. Hallet's Old Block, Peter Lehman Stonewall, Grant Burge Meshach and Elderton Command.

The riesling variety grows especially well in the nearby Eden Valley where a combination of cool nighttime and warm daytime temperatures lengthen the ripening process thereby helping the fruit retain its distinctive citrus flavor and well balanced acidity. With hints of spice and refreshing lime and floral qualities, the Eden Valley riesling is immediately enjoyable, yet also ages exceptionally well, exhibiting a smooth, honeyed palate after 15 to 20 years in the bottle. The best of Eden Valley riesling includes St. Hallett's Eden Valley, Henschke Julius, Pewsey Vale and Orlando Steingarten.

A friend from Melbourne described the present day relationship between Sydney and Melbourne as that of two sisters, Sydney being the sexy, glamorous one that immediately enchants you and Melbourne the quiet, substantial one that eventually wins your love. It is true that the charms of Melbourne are not as overt as those of Sydney, but a little exploration does indeed reveal a diversity and sophistication to rival its celebrated sister. Melbourne presents the first-time visitor with more of a challenge because its attractions are not as centrally located. In fact, most of the best restaurants and bars are not in the city center, but in the surrounding neighborhoods. In this respect, Melbourne is a little reminiscent of Los Angeles with the grungy-hip St. Kilda and the trendy Fitzroy -- Aussie versions of Venice Beach and Los Feliz. The architecture of the outlying neighborhoods has a distinctly Los Angeles feel as well. It is a mosaic of different influences, including California bungalow, Spanish Mission and Tudor styles.

The city center, on the other hand, is a mixture of old and new. Melbourne came of age during the Victorian era. Its rapid expansion was fueled by a gold rush that began in 1851, transforming Melbourne from a fledgling colony on the banks of the Yarra River into the financial and administrative capital of the state of Victoria. The architectural development of the city, in keeping with the stylistic confusion of the era, resulted in many Gothic, Roman and Greek Revival structures.

The Yarra Valley is the oldest wine region in the state of Victoria and, after years of declining production, has recently enjoyed a revitalization. The Yarra's comeback was slow at first with small boutique producers like John Middleton at Mount Mary leading the way in the 1960s. His remarkable success prompted industry heavyweights like James Halliday to invest in Coldstream Hills and De Bortoli to buy Chateau Yarrinya in the 1980s. The region's final stamp of approval came in the 1990s when famed French champagne house Moet et Chandon established Green Point vineyards to produce Domaine Chandon fizz.

It is not by chance that the powers who are shaping the Yarra's latest incarnation have planted more pinot noir than any other red variety. The almost unanimous selection of pinot as the area's flagship grape is due in large part to the Yarra's cool climate, but it also seems that Yarra winemakers are trying to distinguish themselves from the rest of shiraz-happy Australia. By attempting to broaden Australia's image with the inclusion of pinot noir, the Yarra has put itself in the risky position of direct competition with acclaimed pinot producers from Burgundy and the northwestern United States. But today the risks are beginning to pay off. When done well, as many of the Yarra's are, the region's pinot noirs are among the most sensual, nuanced and drinkable reds available. The best of Yarra pinot noir includes Coldstream Hills Reserve, De Bortoli Yarra Valley, Tarrawarra and Mount Mary. Chardonnay is the most widely planted white variety in the Yarra and the best of Yarra chardonnay includes Coldstream Hills, Yarra Yering and Yerringberg.

## **Victoria**

However impressive the other attractions are in Victoria, they pale to its golf. Melbourne is home to the world famous Sandbelt, an area in the city's suburbs that boasts the vast majority of Australia's best courses. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to list Melbourne among the top five golf destinations on earth. The best of them share a similar architectural pedigree-having been either designed or fully renovated by Dr. Alister MacKenzie during his long visit in 1926. As avid golfers remember, he was hired to come all the way from England by Royal Melbourne Golf Club. The club was able to defer some of the costs of the trip by shopping him around to the other clubs in the area. The result, as described by Tom Doak, was a "flurry of activity." From his arrival to his departure for New Zealand two months later, MacKenzie consulted on 19 courses, leaving behind a legacy which has had a positive influence on most golf courses built in Australia since.

MacKenzie may have scattered his expertise, but he somehow saved his best work for his chief client, **Royal Melbourne**. Divided into two 18s, the East and West, a composite of 12 holes from the West and six from the East is used for tournaments. But of the two, it is the West which deserves its reputation as one of the top 10 courses in the world. Royal Melbourne is also the best preserved of all the Sandbelt courses because MacKenzie's understudy, Mick Morcom, held the post of Head Greenkeeper at Royal Melbourne from 1905 to 1935 and Morcom's successor, Claude Crockford, remained faithful to his ideals throughout his 40 year stewardship from 1935 to 1975 -- thus ensuring Melbourne would not suffer from the negligence and amateur tinkering that compromised the integrity of other sandbelt gems.

The perfect complement to Royal Melbourne is **Kingston Heath**. Technically a MacKenzie redesign, the course is on a much more intimate scale, though it recently has been cleared of excess brush to create an openness in the truest spirit of its English heathland contemporaries. On the par-3 15th, MacKenzie left his indelible print on the sandbelt, sculpting a massive bunker which extends from the tee to green. This "bunker that launched a thousand bunkers" became the prototype behind the uniform artistry of the entire Sandbelt. The Sandbelt is characterized by many architectural strengths, but the exquisite bunkering is surely chief among them.

**Victoria Golf Club** is blessed with the same rolling terrain as its famous neighbor, Royal Melbourne. The diverse topography is unique in the otherwise flat Sandbelt and distinguishes these two "sisters" from the rest. Victoria is also distinguished by its ambitious bunkering. An aerial photograph of the course in its heyday reveals virtual oceans of sand, but a change in attitude towards the importance of bunkering and the role of a "members course" led to the emasculation of Victoria. An aerial photograph taken in the late 1980s shows entire bunkers filled in and grown over with grass and many of the remaining bunkers reduced to shriveled, shapeless pits. Only recently has the course begun to return to its formal glory, thanks in no small part to the lobbying and research of European/Australian tour pro-turned-architect Mike Clayton. Clayton is a local who grew up playing the Sandbelt courses and has won many amateur and professional titles on the hallowed grounds. The purity of his intentions is beyond question. Mike Clayton used the original aerial photo to restore Victoria's bunkers to the "architect's original intention."

The remaining sisters include **Metropolitan**, a course with one of the best front nines anywhere. **Yarra Yarra**, which stands out for being especially well-manicured, boasts the best collection of par-3s, including, at the very top of the list, the 14th hole. Never will one see a more thrilling do or die par three without the use of water hazard.

The Mornington Peninsula is to Melbourne what the Hamptons are to New York, or what the Hamptons were to New York before they were spoiled by excessive consumption. The quaint, beachside towns of Portsea and Sorrento on the tip of the peninsula are a 90 minute drive south from the city and serve as a quiet retreat for wealthy Melburnians.

The rolling sand hills that make up the bulk of the peninsula have long been used as a pasture for grazing cattle, but the growing demand for championship golf has developers and designers eager to work with this inspirational terrain.



The most impressive course in the region, Portsea, is also the oldest and least expensive. Portsea is characterized by dramatic elevated tees and holes that ramble over the heaving, tilted terrain and down through the wooded valleys. Prior to his work at Victoria, Mike Clayton gave Portsea a major overhaul, artfully accentuating the course's strategic strengths and natural beauty without diminishing its indelible character. The second best course on the peninsula is the Greg Norman design at the National, a club that is home to three impressive courses. The Old, designed by Robert Trent Jones, offers

some of the best views of any course in the country, and the Peter Thomson design resembles a classic British links. But Norman's **Moonah** course makes best use of the terrain with yawning bunkers and undulating, elevated greens.

Whether one is an oenophile or a serious golfer, or perhaps something of both, Australia will undoubtedly yield a spectacular array of pleasures. Nowhere else on earth will one find such a diverse and breathtaking range of

landscapes, so skillfully cultivated, for golf and wine. And from the seaside dunes of New South Wales to the villages of the Barossa Valley, the landscapes of Australia beckon for the world to come and enjoy! For more information about planning a golf and wine pilgrimage to Australia, please contact us to arrange the golfing safari of your life!

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