A Clear View

One of the lesser-known regions of wine-bountiful South Australia, Clare Valley is a great source for crisp Rieslings and cool-weather reds

By Roger Morris

From the top of Mount Horrocks – a rounded peak covered with sunburned grass that looks less important physically than it is geographically – a visitor can gaze out across many of the towns and vineyards of Clare Valley, the uplands winegrowing region just north of the Barossa Valley in South Australia.

Jeff Grosset and Stephanie Toole are an intriguing pair of husband-and-wife winemakers who each separately owns a winery label – Grosset and Mount Horrocks, respectively – but who in general have different perspectives on grape growing and winemaking. Nevertheless, the two share a common winery building, two children, and amusing tales about their agreements and disagreements.

Grosset’s Gaia vineyard is a few yards down from the top on the mountain’s sheltered side – a steep, cool-weather, mostly Cabernet Sauvignon plot. This year, in the middle of the great drought of 2006-2007, it is producing berries about the size of marbles. Grosset thinks these grapes will make great wine – just very few bottles of it.

Back down the mountain, driving by pastureland and passing an old slate quarry along both edges of a narrow road, is the nearby Polish Hill, a prime area for some of the best dry Rieslings that Australia can make. In part that’s
Fireblock Grenache 2003
Owner Bill Ireland says this wine tastes like “licorice, lolly, and leather,” and its bright fruit could be called “lollipop.” Good intensity, but lighter in color and body. Suggested Retail Price: $19

Fireblock Shiraz 2004
Ripe, rich, and smoky with lots of eucalyptus overtones. Big cherry flavors with soft oak – quite nice, and a great lamb wine. S.R.P.: $19

Grosset Gaia Cabernet Sauvignon 2004
A tart fruit style of wine with mostly red fruit and a touch of black fruit in the finish. Eucalyptus is in there as well. Pleasant meatiness in finish. S.R.P.: $52

Grosset Polish Hill Riesling 2006
Piano-wire tautness with lots of refreshing lime, lively on the tongue with a touch of chalk in finish. Not your limpid Riesling! S.R.P.: $17

Jim Barry The Lodge Hill Shiraz 2004
This is Barry’s entry-level Shiraz, a lovely wine – red fruit aromas, flavors of elderberry and brambles, a bright, minerally mid-body, and a finish of coffee and chocolate. S.R.P.: $17

Mount Horrocks “Cordon Cut” Riesling 2005
When the grapes are ripe, Toole cuts the vines’ cordon to let the sugar intensify. Beautiful wine with tastes of honey and pineapple, unctuous, and a touch gamy. S.R.P.: $33

Mount Horrocks Watervale Riesling 2006
“It’s a Riesling for grownups,” winemaker/owner Stephanie Toole chuckles, and she is right. Taut with bracing lime but a hint of chalk as it leaves the palate. S.R.P.: $28

Pikes Eastside Shiraz 2003
Heavy on the big red fruit, some anise and dark chocolate. A complex wine, with good tannins and spice linger in the finish. S.R.P.: $23

Pikes “Gills Farm” Viognier 2006
Notes of citrus blossom and some peach flavors with nice texture – great wine for a hot afternoon. S.R.P.: $25

because the same vein of slate also runs under the vineyards, giving the grapes a lovely mineral quality.

Stopping briefly at Toole’s Polish Hill vineyard (Cabernet), then one owned by Grosset’s (Riesling), we move on to the important Watervale growing area, where Jeff has another Riesling vineyard, and Stephanie has her Riesling vineyard on a facing slope across a dividing creek.

Back in their home base of Auburn, where their joint winery and his and her tasting rooms are located, Toole points to her Cordon Cut vineyard, whose grapes are used to make luscious dessert Riesling. Devastated by a late spring frost, the vineyard is now recovering, although this year she has had to source fruit elsewhere.

The tour serves as a primer for Clare Valley wines. Polish Hill, Watervale, and Auburn, along with Sevenhill, are prime growing areas in this region that has become increasingly important as a source of Australia Riesling and cool-weather Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon. While the fruit here may not have the lushness of hotter, neighboring Barossa, it does have great intensity.

Increasing Sales in the U.S.
Clare Valley is not as well-known in the United States as Barossa, McLaren Vale, and other large South Australia wine regions, but it is steadily growing in volume. Sales of Clare Valley wines in the U.S. in 2005 were up 341% over figures three years earlier in 2002. Such brands as Pikes, Leasingham, Two Hands, Fireblock, Petaluma, Grosset, Jim Barry, Wakefield, Annie’s Lane, Knapstein, Mount Horrocks, and Tim Gramps regularly find their way to U.S. retail shelves.

“Clare Valley Rieslings are exceptional, and its Shiraz is more muted and savory,” says Howard Asadow, district manager for Connecticut’s Worldwide Wines, who recently visited the region. “I was also impressed with the small wineries with their family values, commitment to quality, and trying to stay true to the region.”

The land itself is rolling hills and small valleys that are mostly grazing land or vineyards, the latter mainly spread out along the 15 miles of North Main Road between
Auburn and Clare city, the region’s two major towns. Clare Valley was once a mining center, but today there is little evidence of that, except for a few pits and quarries.

There was also a time when, like other South Australia regions, many of the grapes grown here were for sweet wines. On a hot March day in mid-harvest, long-time valley resident and Fireblock vineyard manager Bill Walton points to a row of vines whose huge trunks had been cut off a few inches above ground level and new vines grafted in.

“These were originally old Pedro Ximinez vines, but it was decided to graft them over to Shiraz beginning in 1994,” Walton explains, adding that he personally misses the sweet wine that the Sherry grapes once made. Other than that, he says the Shiraz and Grenache dry-farmed vineyard (no irrigation) “is about the same as it was when it was planted in 1926.”

At Pikes winery in Polish Hill, co-owner Neil Pike reflects on what is next for Clare Valley. Although he acknowledges that Rieslings have been instrumental in making a name for the region, he believes its future is in reds. Riesling sales, he says, are flat.

“Shiraz has been our main red variety here,” he says, “but I’ll think you’ll see more interest in the Bordeaux varieties in the future, either individually or in blends. We know how to do Shiraz; now let’s see what else we can do.”

-Neil Pike of Pikes Winery

Bill Walton has managed the un-irrigated Fireblock vineyard for decades, so the great drought of 2006-2007 didn’t faze him.

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