

## Cover story Steve Meacham

## From job to snob

Turn yourself into an expert on all things vinous in four easy steps.

Blue Nun, Cold Duck, Ben Ean, Mateus Rose, Black Tower. I've known and loved them all. So, frankly, I was a little surprised to be assigned this mission.

Good Living's editor was looking for someone who knew "nothing about wine". And a friend (make that a former friend) said I fitted the bill. I might have taken offence but how many times in life do you get paid to drink? Especially when she told me that I had exactly a month to turn myself from wine snub to wine snob. What are we waiting for? Hone up on those fruit similes.

## Hunter Uncorked

As part of Good Food Month, the best of the Hunter Valley's boutique vineyards will be showcased in a tasting promenade. More than 40 wineries will be featured, as well as regional cheese, olive oil and gourmet food. It costs \$15 for a glass and 10 tasting tickets. Sat and Sun, 11am-5pm, Overseas Passenger Terminal, West Circular Quay, 4991 4577.

## The tour

It's 8.30am and I'm in a minibus on the way to the Hunter Valley, sitting behind Richard Everett, owner of Wine Country Tours. Everett trained as an oenologist (winemaker to you and me) and his tour is aimed at people who genuinely want to learn about the Hunter's wines, rather than simply have a nice day out.

Each tour is tailored to particular interests but all contain tastings conducted by Everett, including vintages not available to the public.

Our first winery is Tyrrell's, one of the oldest in the Hunter. Everett stops in front of some gnarled vines growing on a red soil strip. "These shiraz vines were planted in 1879," he says. "The irony is that there are no equivalent vines of that age in France. They are all destroyed by phylloxera [an aphid that eats vine roots]. Now let's head inside for a serious tasting."

I make for the cellar door but Everett diverts

us to Murray's Room, the private tasting room dedicated to the memory of Murray Tyrrell, who died in 2000.

Everett lines up 16 bottles, then places three glasses on some white paper in front of us. "What do we do now?" he asks. My answer – "start drinking" – is wrong. "Smell the empty glass. If it smells of washing liquid or impurities in the water, you'll have ruined good wine before you sip it. Don't be afraid to send glasses back in a restaurant. Or swirl a little of the wine around the glass and throw it away." I watch, aghast, as he does just that.

We start with a verdelho. "Take a sip," Everett orders. I fail miserably. I'm not even holding the glass properly. He tells me to hold it by the stem (to stop the wine warming), lean it at a 45-degree angle and inspect the colour against the white paper. Then he tutors me about the aroma. And then there's the taste: I'm gulping when I should be keeping the wine in my mouth until it warms.

Everett hands us a tasting sheet with each of the wines we're about to sample listed in order, with room to describe their characteristics and the food we would serve with each.

For the next two hours we work our way through the list, Everett explaining the history of each grape variety and the distinctive aspects of each Tyrrell's vintage. We compare notes and, suddenly, expressions such as blackberry, green and robust seem to click into place. After lunch, we head to two other vineyards for similar serious tastings. Note to self: Learn to spit out.

**Cost** \$140 (plus about 50 a person for lunch). **Value for money** 9/10. **Lesson learned** Don't wait 10 years to drink a case of wine only to find the experts were wrong about how long it would last. Drink a bottle a year and trust your judgement.

**Contact** 9484 0477 or [www.winecountrytours.com.au](http://www.winecountrytours.com.au)



## The dinner

Woolahra, 7pm, and I'm booked for a dinner organised by Five Way Cellars at the private dining room above Bistro Moncur. Chef Damien Pignolet has prepared a menu designed to match tonight's battle of the vine: Torbreck v The Rhône.

I'm nervous. Until a web search an hour ago I'd never heard of Torbreck. Now I know that it's an up-and-coming Barossa Valley winery set up nine years ago by David Powell, who sources his fruit from previously neglected old Barossa vines to produce "classic Rhône-style wines". Tonight he's accepted the challenge from Five Way's owner, Ian Cook, to pit his vintages against French equivalents.

After canapes, we're seated. Many of the 40-odd paying customers have come in groups. Most, I notice, are holding their glasses correctly. I'm sitting opposite two bikies who know their wine. Thomas, originally from Dusseldorf, was a beer drinker until he arrived in Australia 20 years ago (perhaps because the alternative was liebfräulich). Michael, originally from Tasmania, used to run his own wine course.

Six glasses are put in front of each of us and then filled from different bottles. The two whites are identified as the 2002 Torbreck viognier/marsanne/roussanne and its Rhône equivalent; they're obviously to be drunk with the carpaccio of ichiban Hiramasa kingfish dressed with capers, chives and grapefruit. The four reds – two Torbreck, two Rhône – go with the Barossa chicken liver pate and melba toast.

Before I've finished my tasting notes, four fresh glasses are put in front of us and we're onto the serious stuff. Torbreck's The Descendant 2001 sells for \$140 a bottle, compared with the Jasmin Côte Rotie 2000 at \$115 a bottle. Both go beautifully with the "prime fillet steak, sauce bordelaise with potato grain and creamed spinach". At that price, you'd expect nothing less.

Thomas asks Powell how he can justify such extravagant prices. Powell explains about the low yield from his vines, their rarity and his general belief that Australian producers price their product too cheaply. Thomas, Michael and I aren't convinced. We agree two of his cheaper reds – the Juveniles 2002 and The Struie 2001, at \$33 and \$53 a bottle each – are better value.

With the cheese, walnut bread, water biscuits and pears comes a new challenge: Powell's The Factor 2000 or the 1998 Guigal Hermitage, both \$140 a bottle. Frankly, by this stage I'm not the only one who is forgetting to hold their glass by the stem. Note to self: learn to decide whether I like a wine on the first, rather than the third, glass.

**Cost** \$150. **Value for money** 9/10.

**Lesson learned** The difference between a \$10 bottle and a \$20 bottle is obvious but between a \$50 bottle and a \$100 bottle it's marginal. **Contact** Five Way Cellars, 9360 4242.



COLD CLIMATE			WARM CLIMATE			HOT CLIMATE (AGED)		
floral perfumed	apple grapefruit	pear lemon	Riesling			tropical fruit	toast	
			lime citrus	passionfruit pineapple	honey	kerosene		
grapefruit	peach nectarine	banana fruit salad	Chardonnay			toast butter	smoked bacon	vanilla
pear			tropical fruit	fig				
			pineapple	cashew				
black pepper	blueberry cherry	jammy mint	Shiraz			cedar charred oak	tobacco earth	
raspberry			black olive eucalypt	salami chocolate				
			Cabernet Sauvignon			mulberry cedar	cigar box earthy	
capsicum tomato leaf	beetroot eucalyptus	mint blackcurrant	plum licorice	black olive dusty				

## The wine fair

Sunday, 11.30am, and I've paid my \$25, collected my tasting glass and am about to sample wine from some of the 75 wineries represented at the Boutique Wine Fair, held at the Overseas Passenger Terminal in The Rocks. I need a tasting plan.

Every vineyard in alphabetical order? Stick to one variety – sauvignon blanc or shiraz – and compare how they can differ according to the region and the producer? Or just go for the gold medal winners in each class, announced the previous evening?

In the end I ignore NSW vineyards (I'll visit those later in person) and do a little geographical tour of the other states. Verdelho from the Victorian High Country; riesling from the Clare; sauvignon blanc from the Barossa; pinot noir from Tasmania; shiraz from the Margaret River.

One relatively new producer, from the Adelaide Hills, pours me his riesling and explains how the grapes are picked before 8am and quickly chilled in a refrigerator. What's that distinctive tang, I ask? Lemon? Gooseberry? He laughs. "We use our neighbour's fridge. It's usually full of his brussels sprouts. Could it be that?" Note to self: wine fairs are more fun the third, glass.

**Cost** \$25. **Value for money** 10/10.

**Lesson learned** Not all boutique wines are good. There's a reason some producers are small. **Contact** Boutique Wine House, 8338 8666, or visit [www.boutiquewines.com.au](http://www.boutiquewines.com.au)

## The wine course

Woolloomooloo, 6.30pm, and I'm one of 30 people on the four-week Introduction To Wine course run by The Wine Society. Some of my fellow students work in bottle shops. Most are people who know they love wine and want to know more about it.

Lecturer Stephen Knight gives us a few tips on how to get rid of wine snobs if seated next to them at dinner parties. His creed is simple: "Taste the wine in your glass, not the label on the bottle or the price you have paid."

The course runs for two hours every Monday evening for a month. Tonight we're going to investigate two important questions: First, how to describe wine. Second, why does one producer's chardonnay or shiraz cost \$8 a bottle and another's \$24?

Answering those questions involves tasting 12 different wines (and Knight advises us at the beginning to use the spoons provided if we're driving). The first six are laid out in order: semillon, riesling, chardonnay, rose, shiraz and a cabernet sauvignon/merlot blend.

For the best part of an hour we don't actually taste any of them. We learn to look at the visual characteristics and sniff their aroma (I fail miserably to identify the corked wines, which I suppose vindicates my friend).

Knight explains how our sense of taste and smell works. Most of us have forgotten. He explains the various tastes on the tongue – sweet at the tip, salty and sour further back, bitter at the rear – and we learn to identify different taste sensations that make up a wine. The fruit itself. The flavour from the wood if the wine has been

exposed to oak – vanilla, coconut, tarry, depending on the type of wood used and the length of the exposure. The "doughy or nutty" taste caused by yeast lees ageing. The taste of the natural acids and the tannins and the effect they have on "the feel" of the wine in your mouth.

Then he runs us through the lexicon of wine. In our notes, there's an invaluable cheat sheet that lists the primary flavours associated with each of the most popular grape varieties (see chart) and how they vary according to the climate in which the grape is grown. Some varieties have distinctive aromas. A cold-climate riesling often smells of limes, Knight says, while a warmer climate chardonnay often smells of peaches and melon. A cool-climate shiraz smells of black pepper and a cab sav often resembles blackcurrants.

At last we're let loose to practise our descriptive powers. Using the cheat sheet, each of us samples a particular wine and writes down which aromas are most appropriate. Then we compare notes, taking care to list the "complexity" of the taste (the mixture and range of the flavours) and the "length of the palate" (how many seconds the taste of the wine lingers and how it changes in the mouth).

The second part of lesson one involves tasting three chardonnays and three shirazes. We are asked to describe each, and work out which is the most expensive and why.

Knight runs through the factors that alter the price of the wine – climate, yield, mechanisation, age of the vines and so on – and then asks whether we'd prefer three bottles of the cheap wine or one bottle of the most expensive. Most plump for two bottles of the one in the middle (unless, of course, someone else is paying).

To my consternation, I find that even by the end of the course my sense of smell is so poor that – almost alone in the group – I am unable to distinguish a bad wine simply by its aroma.

Note to self: look upon it as a blessing – it means you can drink stuff others can't stomach.

**Cost** \$200. **Value for money** 9/10.

**Lesson learned** Roughly one bottle in every dozen is cork-tainted and there's no way of knowing which one until it's opened. How many bottles have you sent back? **Contact** The Wine Society, 1300 723 723, or visit [www.winesociety.com.au](http://www.winesociety.com.au)

## The verdict

So what did I learn and do I now qualify as a wine snob? Refreshingly, all four experiences were casual and easygoing.

The wine fair, given the cheap price of the wine, was the best value but offered little in the way of tuition (masterclass sessions were available but I booked too late). The tour was far more informative than I'd expected and the best individual instruction of the four. The dinner was less forbidding and more enjoyable than I had imagined. It was incredible value, given the quality of the wine and food.

However, in terms of the amount of knowledge gained, nothing compares with an organised course such as the one offered by The Wine Society. I even got a "certificate of merit". To prove I can drink?

Does it mean I can identify a corked bottle of wine before I'm charged for it at a restaurant? Hopefully. Can I tell whether a chardonnay has been aged in oak barrels or merely exposed to oak wood chips? Yes, by reading the label. "Hints of oak" or "subtle oak flavour" suggest the vineyard has gone for the cheaper option.

Can I tell a merlot from a shiraz or a sauvignon blanc from a semillon? Probably, but I wouldn't know which part of the country they came from. Can I identify the difference between a 56c bottle and a \$20 bottle. Not reliably enough to pay the extra \$40. Am I better at matching wines with food? Yes. Now I better be a cooking course.

Has my mission made me appreciate the wine in my glass any more? Yes – and the men and women who produce it.

**School's in (left to right): Discover the different flavours in a glass of wine; Stephen Knight at The Wine Society class; students go over their notes; tasting wine at the Boutique Wine Fair.** Photos: Stephen Baccon, Annabel Moeller, Wade Laube. Main photo styled by Samm Moiler

