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Melbourne's credentials as great wine capital upheld

Melbourne mixes with the best as a member of the world's wine elite.



Melbourne is Australia's rightful wine capital.

by **Tim White**

Melbourne used to be one of the Great Wine Capitals of the World: the network – club if you like – of wine-centric cities, established in 1996 by the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce. Its members now include Bilbao (for Rioja in Spain), Cape Town (for the Cape Winelands of South Africa), Mainz (for the Rheinhessen), Porto (for the Douro in Portugal), San Francisco (for the Napa Valley in the US), Valparaiso (for the Casablanca Valley in Chile), Mendoza (Argentina), and the aforementioned Bordeaux.

Like I say, *used* to be. There was an assembly of the Great Wine Capitals of the World held in Melbourne in November 2004 back when the Bracks Labor government was in power. It was also during that government's tenure that the controversial Myki public transport ticketing system was conceived (but more about that later).

Anyhow, with changes in political leadership later that decade, membership of the GWC somehow lapsed. And Australia's wine capital ambitions are now being pursued by Adelaide, which certainly has strong claims given the handful of significant wine regions between 20 minutes (the Adelaide Hills) and 80 minutes (the Clare Valley) drive from the CBD. As well as Adelaide being Australia's centre of wine academe.

Not that being a member of this club precludes any city from claims of being a great town of wine and food culture, of course, and Melbourne is emphatically that. As a now-resident of Adelaide, and formerly both a Melburnian and Sydneysider, although a native of neither, I'll emphatically state that Melbourne is Australia's rightful wine capital.

It, like Adelaide, has a number of fine places that grow wine within easy driving distance: around an hour in the car will get you to the Yarra Valley and the Mornington Peninsula, and while it's a bit further to Gippsland, the Macedon Ranges and Geelong are even closer to town.

But for a "wine capital" claim, a city needs to provide much more than significant wine-growing districts on its doorstep. It requires a culture of gastronomic appreciation and enjoyment and, again, Melbourne certainly has a track record of that. The first Australian capital city *Good Food Guide* was that of Melbourne. So too in Melbourne was the first significant food and wine festival of international ambition. Today Sydney might rightfully make the claim as being the country's greatest dining centre and, for that matter, as the place which provides more stimulating wine and food events, but it still can't compete in the wine regional proximity department.

Sydney's wine bar – bar scene generally – is super exciting these days, but with the liquor licensing laws liberalised in Melbourne a quarter of century ago, the

Victorian capital certainly has the most complex, evolved wine bar culture. I recall as a Sydneysider during the 1990s being extremely enthusiastic on every visit to Melbourne at the expectation of tasting exciting new wines at different bars from lunch to supper time.

I'd also suggest that during this gastronomic coming-of-age decade the most exciting purveyors of diverse and varied imported wines – so important in the evolution of a complex wine appreciation culture – was centred on Melbourne. Significant arrivals of "new" wines from Austria, Germany, Italy, Spain and, later, Portugal, came into the country via Melbourne in significant number. And easy access was provided to them by the evolving network of bars offering them by the glass. The same is now true of Sydney without doubt, and Adelaide's coming along too.

Which brings me to Myki, which has prompted more debate and division in Melbourne than any other significant, government-sponsored "cultural" initiative I can think of. Not Fed Square, even though that public space had many detractors. Not me though, as I used to love origami as a kid. Not even the Grand Prix has pissed off quite so many people, I suggest. And as someone who used to play futsal in the Albert Park building appropriated for the Melbourne Grand Prix pits, I've a good reason to be, as it meant we had to play somewhere else for six weeks while the circuit was being worked on.

For the visitor, you see, Myki makes the task of hopping on and off the trams (especially) for coffee, wine, beer, lunch and dinner just so much more difficult. Each time I head to Melbourne I invariably leave one of my three Mykis – which I've had to pay for – in the drawer of my desk. And what the hell does Myki stand for anyhow? Metcard at least sounded public transport-related.

Apparently Melbourne is now the world's only major city without a short-term ticketing option. I'd suggest to the burghers of this great city that they visit Vienna, which is easily the world's greatest wine town, what with its legions of heurigen and buschenshanken, and 1500 hectares of vineyards within its city limits, and take a look at its ticketing system which hasn't substantially changed in the two decades I've been visiting the city.

Because there's enough to plan when you travel, let alone having to pay an access fee in advance of using public transport. But hey, despite this, Melbourne is still *mykindatown*.

WHAT TO DRINK

Star Lane Vineyard Quattro Vitigni 2012 [Beechworth, Vic]

This has a touch of Aussie sous bois – that is a slight eucalypt character – and plenty of pure currant fruit. Lipsmacking dark berry flavours, and excellent building tannins and palate weight. The blend contains nebb, sangio, merlot, shiraz). 93/100, \$30

Heathcote Estate Single Vineyard Shiraz 2012 [Heathcote, Vic]

Subtle Aussie sous bois here too, and red dirt, hot rocks, pie crust and panforte – wow! Fine wood backing it up too. A ripsnorting palate with real, red wines tannins: chew, heft, cherry stone, souk spices, pippy fruit flavours, and a fab finish. Classy stuff. 95/100, \$53

Curly Flat Chardonnay 2012 [Macedon Ranges, Vic]

Pure, white stonefruit, peach fuzzy, and a sort of roast nuttiness. Some candied fruit in the mix also. It's packed with pure, mouth-watering stonefruit on the palate too, but reserved, like the flesh that clings to the kernel. There's a lustre to this, and creaminess, and gentle chewiness. Satisfying. 94/100, \$42

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