

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

A Gift From Down Under



Aussie Red Is Big In Price—and Taste; Avoiding Impostors

EACH YEAR around this time, we suggest one break-the-bank, you-shouldn't-have-bottle-for-the-wine-lover-in-your-life. We make this recommendation long before the holidays to give you plenty of time to find it. Our suggestion this year: Penfolds Grange.

If you just broke into a broad smile and a warm glow coursed through your body, you're already familiar with Grange. Wine-lovers remember their first Grange the way they remember their first kiss. We still remember where we were (at a country inn) and even what Dottie was wearing (green velvet) when we had our first and we'll never forget how each tiny sip of this wine was filled with rich, intense and truly unique tastes.

Grange was created by Penfolds' winemaker Max Schubert in 1951 and has long been Australia's most famous wine. It's made from Shiraz (occasionally

with a little bit of Cabernet Sauvignon) from various vineyards, generally in the Barossa Valley, and aged for about 18 months in new American oak. Somewhere around 7,000 to 9,000 cases are made every year and the wine is released five years after the harvest.

Even though Australia has become a major player on the world's wine scene over the past decade, no other wine has come close to approaching the quality and fame of Grange (which was called Grange Hermitage until 1990). And even though it can be expensive—\$200 and up, up, up—even well-aged Grange can seem positively reasonable these days compared to some of California's cult wines and the latest “vintage of the century” Bordeaux.

The Perils of Fame

What vintages are out there, how much do they cost and how are they drinking? We bought 10 vintages going back to 1971 to find out. We got them earlier this year, in May, and kept them in our cellar so they'd have a chance to relax. These are not the kind of wines you'll usually find down at the corner wine

store, but they are available at many good stores and on the Internet, at sites such as 2020wines.com, hdhwine.com and cellar.com. The Wall Street Journal has reported in the past that the fame of Grange has made it a target of counterfeiters, so it's particularly important to deal with a reputable merchant when you're buying these. And if you do have a bottle shipped to yourself or a friend, make sure to get express delivery so it doesn't have to travel for long in uncertain weather.

We tasted the 10 vintages over more than a week. We did not taste these blind, drinking one each night over several hours, both with and without food, to give each wine every opportunity to show its stuff.

And what stuff it was. We have been writing this column for almost a decade now and have been drinking and studying wine for 35 years, but we have never had such a consistently exciting tasting. We expected to enjoy these wines, but we never would have guessed that five of the 10 wines would rate Delicious or higher. Like all great wines, these are impossible to adequately describe in words, but here's a hint:

The color is quite dark, preparing you right away for a wine of some weight and intensity. The nose is massive and complex, with rich soil, cedar, tobacco, blackberries and blueberries—all with a certain meatiness to it. The taste, at first, is explosive, with concentrated, focused, pure flavors of ultra-rich fruit. Then, surprisingly, the wine smooths out, with a perfect amount of oak taste soothing the tannins. As the wine finishes, just the right dash of acidity keeps the wine from being too big, too brawny. It becomes elegant and structured despite its rich intensity. After it's swallowed, the finish is as explosive as the first sip, leaving an endless taste of earth and fruit. If

we had to use a single word to describe the experience, we guess it would be lusty.

Surprisingly Consistent

Our very favorite among the wines, to our own surprise, was the youngest, the 2001, which rated a rare Delicious! But it was difficult to choose among them. These age so well that even the 1971 was beautiful and could age for still more years. In fact, the biggest surprise of the tasting was the consistency of the wines. Through decades, wine-makers and even corporate owners, these wines all shared a similar vision that's the result of careful grape selection and blending.

“Big wine” has become a cliché. These days, it tends to mean heavy, alcoholic, mind-blowing, “a man's wine”—you know, the kind that could put hair on your chest. Grange proves that big, ripe fruit, even with a good dose of oak, can create a wine of tremendous elegance even with some explosive intensity. Grange also shows what Shiraz can be, and that's too easy to forget these days when so many Australian Shirazes are sweet, alcoholic, simple and unpleasant.

Grange is one of those wines that wine-lovers buy and talk about far more than they actually drink it. Because it is so special and because it seems like it will always be better with more age, we tend to look at our bottles, think about opening them—and put them back on the shelf. That's why a bottle of Grange is a great present for someone who has never tried it or for a budding wine-lover who's ready to stretch some taste buds, but also for a wine-lover who knows it well. In the latter case, enclose a note that says, “This isn't to cellar. This is to drink—now.” At any age, Grange is a special treat.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. You can contact us at wine@wsj.com.

The Dow Jones Grange Index

In a tasting of 10 vintages of Penfolds Grange, here are our notes, in order of our preference. These wines are designed to age for many years. Serve with a great steak or robust, savory vegetable dishes. We have noted the prices we paid, but these are specialty items and prices vary widely. Young bottles of Grange probably should be decanted, especially if you don't have all night to linger over the wine, but taste first to make sure it needs the extra air.

VINTAGE	PRICE	RATING	TASTERS' COMMENTS
'01	\$225	Delicious!	Black pepper, cedar, earth and rich, concentrated fruit. Wow. Intense blackberry, blueberry and black-cherry fruit with pinpoint clarity and perfect balance of fruit, oak and acidity. Real guts, real structure.
'71	\$995	Delicious	Brown-tinged, but not at all over the hill. Still rich and meaty, with great fruit, some chocolate and serious pepper. A real meal, elegant and complete, with everything well-integrated and all sorts of ephemeral tastes that linger for a very long time after each swallow. Still some bite and real tannins. Amazing wine for its age.
'87	\$425	Delicious	Even the nose seems chewy—rich and deep, with leather, tobacco, cedar, sandalwood, blackberries, blueberries and meat juices. Not a hint of age. Brawny yet elegant, with great stature and balance. Think about the very best steak you have ever had—sweet, textured, soul-satisfying—and you can get an idea what this is like.
'90	\$695	Delicious	Explosively intense, with deep, dark, tightly wound fruit and a kind of haunting smokiness. Perfect age—still intense, but calm, classy and mature. A sophisticated, special-occasion wine. We would drink this now; it will still be lovely for a long time, but it won't get better.
'95	\$295	Delicious	Dry and powerful, with tightly wound, rich fruit. Bold and spicy. Still quite young—hasn't lost anything with age. The structure and stature of a fine young Bordeaux, with a dash of black pepper.
'92	\$335	Very Good/Delicious	Beautiful dark, rich color. Intense, powerful tastes—you can sense it staining your insides. Very dry, with blackberries, earth and minerals. Muscular. Not as well-structured or well-integrated as some others, with power replacing some elegance.
'81	\$450	Very Good	Looks brown at first, smells tired, but after a few minutes it opens up into a lovely, charming and attractive wine with plenty of class. Drink up.
'94	\$295	Very Good	Still hard as a rock, with an awesome underpinning of minerals and young, tight, black fruit. Particularly fetching long, dry, mineral finish.
'93	\$300	Good/Very Good	Tired and a bit prune-like. Soft and lacking complexity. With some time, it pulls itself together for a time and is charming, but it clearly is on the downside.
'88	\$395	Good	Nicely earthy, but it seems a bit heavy and even leaden compared to others, perhaps slightly tired but simply not showing much life or character.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores in California and New York. Prices vary widely.

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Watch John and Dottie taste and talk about Grange at WSJ.com/Tastings