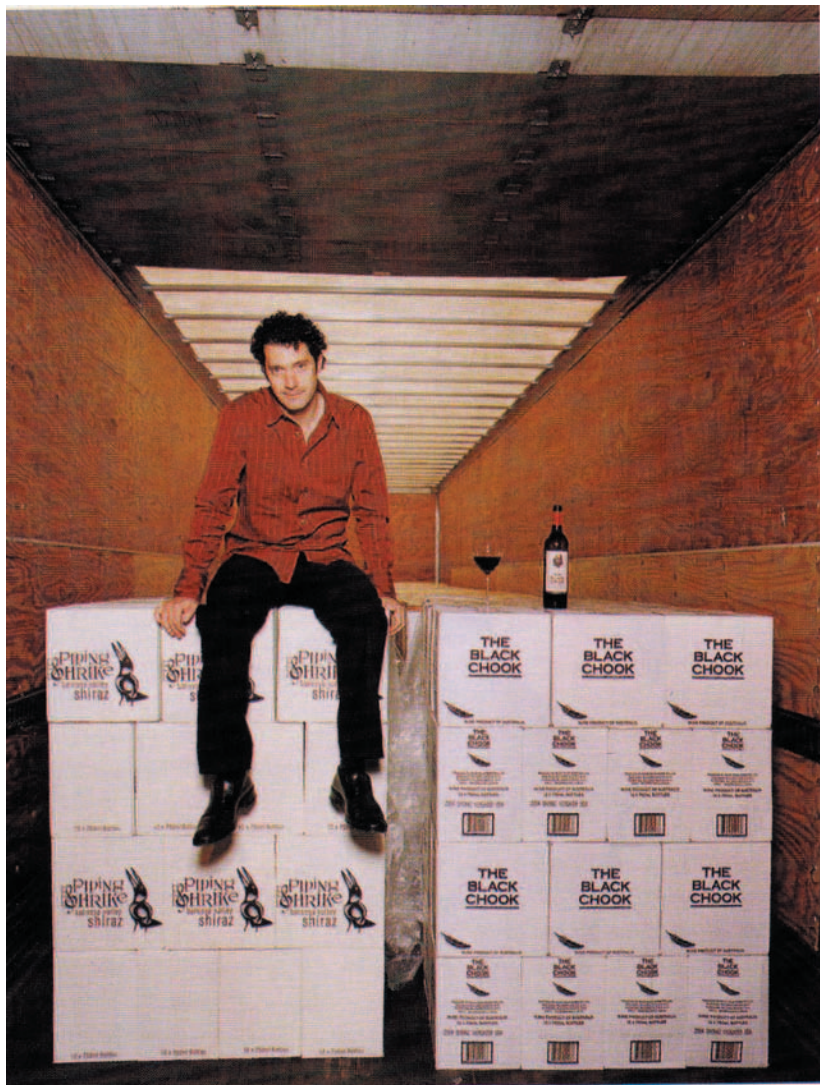


THE NEW AUSTRALIAN INVASION

AN INTREPID AMERICAN IS IMPORTING BIG WINES FROM
DOWN UNDER THAT ADD FINESSE TO THE CUSTOMARY MUSCLE

BY JAY MCINERNEY



with only two prospects in his sights, he woke toward dawn in yet another crummy hotel room, this one in the Barossa Valley, to find the walls literally seething with millipedes. “By this time I was pretty depressed,” he says. Fortunately, wine making in both regions was more advanced than the hospitality industry, and Hammerschlag is a persistent and highly competitive son of a bitch with a very good palate. Over the past five years he has assembled a portfolio, Epicurean Wines, that represents something of a new wave in the Australian invasion.

At the time of his unpromising first visit, Hammerschlag was working as a wine buyer for a supermarket called QFC in Bellevue, a wealthy suburb of Seattle. In a few years he almost doubled QFC's wine business, deciding in the process that he had a “popular palate.” Among the most crowd-pleasing wines he discovered for his clients were old-vine Shirazes from Australia's Barossa Valley, which had just begun to trickle into this country, thanks to a few boutique importers like John Larchet's Australian Premium Wine Collection and Dan Philips's Grateful Palate. “It was a style of wine that Americans loved,” Hammerschlag says, “rich and powerful and generous and all about instant gratification.” Some Aussies, according to Hammerschlag, refer to these big Barossa Shirazes as “leg spreaders,” or, when they are feeling more politically correct, as “T&A” wines. However, given the sheer size and power of these behemoths, stereotypically masculine metaphors seem more appropriate to me; High-octane potions like Kaesler's Old Bastard Shiraz remind me more of a muscle car like a Dodge Charger or a Viper than of a starlet, more of Russell Crowe than Naomi Watts.

The only problem with these South Australian reds, it seemed to Hammerschlag, was that they were pretty hard to find. Potions like Elderton's Command Shiraz or Clarendon Hills' Astralis were made in small quantities from vines, including

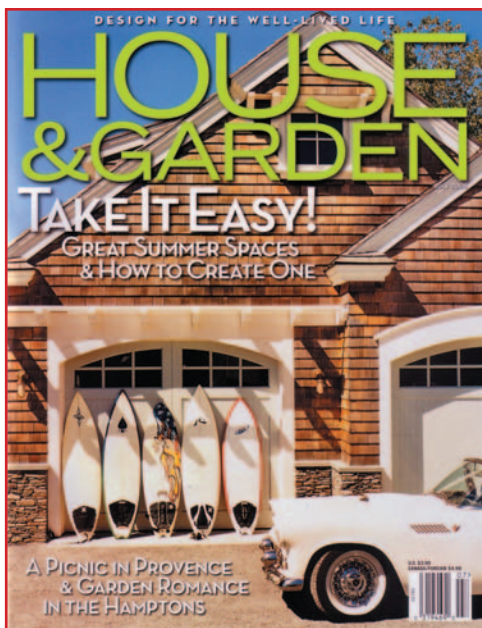
When they shoved a metal tray with his dinner through a slot in the door of his room, Benjamin Hammerschlag was beginning to think that he'd probably made a big mistake and that he'd be going back to his day job in a Seattle grocery store. He was staying in what passed for a hotel in the Franklin River region of western Australia, “a pub full of misshapen humanity, pretty much the end of the earth,” as he describes it, while seeking out premium wines to import into the States. A week later,

Hammerschlag with his hard-won discoveries from Australia. he has been able to change our impression of the country's wines by locating those that manage to express a sense of place.

Shiraz and Grenache, planted in the early twentieth century. (Old vines, it's generally conceded, make more intense and powerful wines than younger ones.)

Although Grange, Penfolds's prototype for premium Australian Shiraz, dates back to 1951, when Penfolds's chief winemaker, Max Schubert, came home from a visit to Bordeaux determined to make a world-class wine, it remained something of a one-off until the 1980's when others began making big, rich Barossa Shirazes. In just a couple of decades, Australia has become a wine-making superpower, and Australian winemakers circumnavigate the globe spreading their fruity, high-tech gospel.

Much as Hammerschlag loved the big, badass Barossa Shirazes, he was presumptuous enough to believe that there was room for some finesse and more of a specific sense of place in the wines. (Grange uses grapes from all over South Australia) and that he could coax even better wines from the country if he could find the right talent. "I consider myself a talent agent," he says. Upon his arrival in Adelaide in '99, he made the rounds of the wine stores and accumulated 36 bottles of the local red, which he tasted in his millipede-infested hotel room. Then he started working the phone. He was lucky enough, and early enough, to find a core of extremely talented young winemakers, including Dan Standish, the winemaker at Torbreck; Ben Glaetzer, who was involved with his family's estate; Ben Riggs; and Reid Bosward. In the years since he signed them, Hammerschlag has become more and more involved in the wine-making process, a commitment that has nearly ruined his teeth - the result of tasting through thousands of barrels of tannic young reds.



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EPICUREAN WINES

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THE OENOFILE

- 2002 THE STANDISH SHIRAZ** I'm in love. The most complete, complex young Shiraz I've tasted. The velvety mouth feel is positively erotic. Lush blackberry and blueberry fruit with highlights of leather and smoke. \$60
- 2003 AMON-RA SHIRAZ BAROSSA VALLEY** A Hollywood blockbuster with an indie sensibility, this inky, smoky fruit bomb is everything we love in old-vine Barossa Shiraz-and less. Less flab and more finely etched detail. Give this a year or two and then fire up the grill and butterfly the leg of lamb. \$78
- 2004 HAAN VIOGNIER PRESTIGE BAROSSA VALLEY** Hammerschlag doesn't think much of Australia's white wines, but this one's a gem; a rich Condrieu imitator with a honeysuckle nose, apricot fruit, perfect balance, and a long, elegant off-dry finish. \$35
- 2004 KAESLER AVIGNON PROPRIETARY RED BAROSSA VALLEY** This Grenache, Shiraz, and Mourvedre blend will remind you of a serious Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape. Restrained, with Rhonish earthy notes and plenty of structure. Great now, better in a year. \$30
- 2004 WOOP WOOP SHIRAZ SOUTH AUSTRALIA** Your new house red. Loads of cherry and blueberryfruit and a nice peppery note. Perfect for grilled meat. Buy some cases for your next cookout. \$11

"I go for that tightrope quality," he says through his dingy choppers one spring evening at the Soho Grand Hotel, as we slurp the '02 Kaesler Avignon Proprietary Red, which would make a really good Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape. "Pushing the limits, but still maintaining balance and harmony." To put it another way, Ben's Fruit Loops have fiber, and his muscle cars have precise handling and even, sometimes, luxurious interiors. Dan Standish's '01 The Standish, for instance, is the most satisfying young Aussie red I've ever tasted - an old-vine Shiraz that has complex leather and coffee aromatics, an unbelievably voluptuous and viscous texture, and a long, lingering finish that left me alternately giddy and awestruck.

After just two vintages, Ben Glaetzer's Amon Ra and Mitolo's G.A.M., two old-vine Shirazes, have become instant legends, earning exceptional ratings in the *Wine Advocate*, although like many of Epicurean's wines they are made in tiny quantities. Mitolo also bottles an amarone-style cabernet called Serpico that will drive your tasting group into raptures. Fortunately, Hammerschlag has been just as energetic in finding wines for budget-minded hedonists - seriously fun reds like the Black Chook and the aptly named Woop Woop Shiraz. Competitive as he is, Hammerschlag will be furious with me for mentioning that there are some other fine importers, like Appellation Imports, Click Wine Group, Old Bridge Cellars, Old Vines Australia, and Weygandt-Metzler, but nobody is bringing in more consistently thrilling Australian wines than Epicurean.