Merlot is a very recent arrival in Australia. It was not until 1980 that it was separately recorded with a crush of a mere 68 tonnes. Here two points arise; first, there is a high degree of probability that some, perhaps much would have been Cabernet Franc. For a period of time in the 1970s, the nursery material sold in Victoria and New South Wales as Merlot was in fact Cabernet Franc. Secondly, the statistical net did not and does not capture small vineyards, often the very kind to venture into what was then an exotic variety. So on the other side there was an element of under-reporting.

When it reappears on the statistics in 1988, the crush was 1,174 tonnes. Figure 1 shows the increase since that time from 1,174 to 51,269 tonnes, which is remarkable in itself. It is even more so looking at Figure 2, which shows the annual and cumulative growth over the same period for what are now the three most important red varieties. Merlot's growth has come from the lowest base, but it grew by almost 400% between 1997 and 2000.

A statistical background may be a logical starting point. However there is a second agenda: the unreliable, unpredictable and (perhaps) inexplicable irregularity in the fruit set of merlot, particularly when planted on its own roots in a temperate climate.

However, in George Gershwin's words, 'it ain't necessarily so'. In parts of Australia as in the Gironde, Languedoc-Roussillon, Northern Italy and Chile, Merlot can effortlessly—indeed promiscuously—produce large crops that translate into pleasant but unremarkable red wine. Its high yield and relatively early ripening habit is no doubt responsible for its popularity in France where, in 1988 it was the third most widely planted grape after Carignane and grenache. With plantings of 60,000 hectares, Merlot is a long way in front of Cabernet Sauvignon with 36,500ha.

So it is that both in areas which are suited to the production of high quality merlot (conspicuously the Margaret River region) and those with yield as a primary objective (such as the Riverland) merlot can regularly produce large yields, so that bunch thinning is regularly undertaken in the Margaret River.

There are other important respects in which Merlot in Australia parallels its character in the rest of the world. The Oxford Companion to Wine states that “Although Merlot has become the red (and therefore fashionable) answer to Chardonnay, few of those who order it in such quantity—typically by the glass in the United States—would be able to describe its flavour with any precision, one thing they would be agreed on though is that it is ‘smooth’.”

The authors continue: “If any single wine promoted texture rather than flavour to the front rank of concerns for American winemakers it is Merlot. 'Cabernet without the pain',” (Robinson et al, 1999 p 445.)

These words are entirely apposite to Merlot in this country. In various articles written over the past decade or more, this author has unsuccessfully endeavoured to find a common theme to flavour descriptors for Merlot, variously seeking the opinions of the foremost Merlot exponents in this country, and by sifting through tasting notes of others published both here and in the United States.

Having regard to wine show results in Australia simply underlines the problem. As a wry commentary on the tendency of shows to reward size, wines with high extract, oak and alcohol often emerge with the top points. The Oxford Companion puts it perfectly: “Indeed, one of its flavour characteristics in France, a fragrance bordering on herbaceousness, is seen as a positive drawback by many American tasters”. (Op cit p 445.)

On 16 September 2001, the author participated in a blind tasting of Merlots (some with a percentage of Cabernet Franc) from around the world. All were from the 1998 vintage, and...
six countries or states were represented: France, Italy, California, Washington State, New Zealand and Australia. France’s contribution was Chateau Ausone, Chateau La Fleur Petrus, Chateau Cheval Blanc and Chateau Petrus. The tasting was staged by the Margaret River winery, Xanadu, which was brave enough to include its own wine (and others from the Margaret River) in the Australian component.

The celebrated American winewriter Robert Parker was quoted in some of the background notes using descriptors as “ferociously tannic but gorgeously extracted” (for what turned out to be Chateau Ausone); “exceptional concentration and muscle... sweet black cherry-and-cassis scented fruit” (Chateau La Fleur Petrus); and “thick, mocha, fudge, black cherry liqueur, and sweet jammy fruit flavours... enormously concentrated, massively endowed... the unchallenged wine of the 1998 vintage (Chateau Petrus)”).

It is difficult to imagine better descriptors for Australian Cabernet Sauvignon made in a warm vintage by winemakers aiming for every ounce of flavour and extract. Surely this should not be the aim (or the consequence) for Merlot.

What regions in Australia are best suited to the making of high quality Merlot? Provocatively no doubt, they are listed in order of preference: Margaret River, Coonawarra, Yarra Valley and Adelaide Hills. Each has a maritime climate (with the qualified exception of the Adelaide Hills) and each has a growing season (using heat degree-days, mean January temperature and growing season rainfall) comparable to that of Bordeaux.

The most notable exclusion is McLaren Vale, and there are doubtless others that would be included by other commentators and/or winemakers. If the list is accepted, it becomes self-evident that merlot is a fussy variety about its environment, and is almost (but not quite) as difficult to please as Pinot Noir. It also shares with pinot noir an intolerance of being over-cropped. In making these observations, it has to be stressed that the yardstick is that of super-premium wine, not fighting varietal.

In the winery the chief issue is the use of oak: extended maceration versus partial barrel fermentation; the type of oak; the percentage of new oak and the length of maturation in oak. The aim should be to gently cradle the wine in oak, not to smother it. Perhaps the control of pH should also be mentioned; even high quality merlot can have a tendency to brown prematurely.

To conclude, and to attempt the impossible, this is the author’s description of what three-year-old super-premium Australian Merlot should be. Colour: red-purple, bright, and of medium depth. Bouquet: fragrant, with sweet, small berry fruit at its core surrounded by faintly herbal/olive/savoury/cedary aromas. Palate: medium-bodied; the flavours a mix of ripe, but not jammy, red and blackcurrant with a gentle infusion of herb, olive and spice (the latter partly from oak); the texture derived from fine, ripe and silky tannins; the finish long and lingering, without any abruptness. More than anything, it should be clearly distinguished from Cabernet Sauvignon.