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Greatness in wines is always a patchy business



Extreme heat and rain emphatically determined when to pick the 2016 harvest in the Clare Valley. **Supplied**

by [Tim White](#) Wine is one of those commodities a critic can assess with something approaching objective rigour, if so inclined. Tasting wine "blind" – in randomised line-ups where the exact identity of each wine is hidden – is a bit more challenging than checking out the label before you stick the liquid under your nose and slip it over your tongue. But it does mean you're less likely to be predisposed to specific views.

If you're a really pedantic individual, you might elect to taste your wine from a vessel such as the Riedel Blind tasting glass. This mouth-blown Austrian stemware is stained purple-black with manganese oxide to remove distracting visual clues. Yours truly is one such pedant, although I do taste from super-fine Zalto glass and regular restaurant-strength Spiegelau also.

A lot can happen with a switch of glassware, but more on that some other time.

Pretty much any foodstuff that's bottled, bagged or tinned can be evaluated blind, although not necessarily or ideally in fine crystal. In addition to wine, spirits, beer and other (sometimes) delicious alcoholic beverages, I've had fun doing comparative tastings of olive oil, anchovies, pepper, chocolate, tea.



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Three rieslings worth finding.

When I lined up a few dozen 2010 vintage Clare and Eden Valley rieslings in December 2010, there was one especially good reason to taste them blind (or half-blind, since I knew where they were from and the number of producers included): Three of the rieslings were my partner Kerri's.

Not only am I a forthright critic, but she was also a bit weirded out that I was tasting the wine in these black glasses. Winemakers, and most other wine drinkers, do like to see the colour of what they're imbibing.

It was a little odd for me too: this was the first time I'd conducted a serious tasting of wine made by someone living under the same roof. But Kerri need not have been concerned: three of her wines made it into my top 10, scoring 94/100, 94/100 and 93/100. I did have an inkling about one of them, but in hindsight I think it was more of the vineyard character I'd become familiar with.

My top four wines back then were '10 mesh (Eden Valley), clos Clare, Grosset Springvale and Grosset Polish, each of which scored 94(95)/100. And all have developed deliciously over the intervening years: 2010 delivered some smart riesling in the Clare and Eden valleys.

Six years later, I'm setting up a blind tasting next month of 28 rieslings from the Clare and Eden valleys (with a ring-in or two from the Canberra District and Great Southern), and Kerri is still freaked out.

Sixteen's an interesting vintage, not just in the mid-north but in many regions across the south-eastern corner of our vast country. It was an incredibly compact vintage, with larger-than-expected crops in many parts, and extreme heat and drought or extreme heat and rain depending on the location. Clare Valley experienced the latter.

And so to the wines. There are fewer in 2016 at the super-stellar level compared with 2010 (or 2015), but my highest-rated wine was the Grosset Polish Hill (see What to Drink), the last wine in the line-up. When I first sniffed this I wrote in my notes: "Me likey, want to taste this one first, even though it's last (as it were)." Incidentally, Grosset Springvale I scored 92(93)/100. My top five was rounded out by the two other wines reviewed, the Petaluma Hanlin Hill, and one of Kerri's.

Which is to get to the point, about points. Kerri's other wines I scored 93(94)/100, 91/100, 90/100 and 89(90)/100. Now I love them all, of course, and I'd mark them all at 7/10 and above on my hedonic scale for obvious reasons. But the point here is that no winemaker achieves absolute excellence and consistency in every single vintage:

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vines don't always allow you to do that, nor the weather nor the dirt. If they did, it wouldn't be wine but something put together in a factory.

Not even the finest producers of Australian wines (apart from an exception or two) achieve the monotonously elevated consistency some commentators would have you believe they do.

Back in July 2009, Felicity Carter of Meininger's Wine Business International stated in a lecture: "Another area where plain speaking would be helpful is in the wine media. There has long been a 'speak no evil' policy among the wine press – with some very honourable exceptions – where wines that don't come up to scratch are gently passed over, unremarked, unless they come from the big companies, in which case wine writers are happy to give them a well-deserved kick."

Ironically, she neglected to identify the honourable exceptions. But I wonder what she'd think of the scene now, which is way more compliant than it was back then. Perhaps the continued absence of significant critical engagement and the rise in overly generous reviews and ratings is linked to the commensurate growth in the lucrative cottage industry in favourable third-party endorsements?

Anyhow, as I've singled out Grosset for praise and his rieslings are indisputably the white wine standard in the Clare Valley, here are my points for the Polish Hill/Springvale pair for the vintages 2011-2014: 92/90; 94/87, 94(95)/92, 90(92)/93(94) and 94(95)/95(96).

As you might expect given the widely varying vintage conditions, there is an appropriate range in the scores. So don't believe anyone who insists year in, year out that almost all of Australia's wine producers make wines worthy of 94 points and higher. Near perfection across every vintage, every vineyard, and every cellar is incredibly rare: nature doesn't work that way. Human nature, on the other hand, is inclined to judge the contents of a bottle by its label.

What to drink | visions of riesling

Knappstein Riesling 2016 [Clare Valley, SA] Has deep citrus rind and stonefruit kernel. Smells pure, with lime jelly on the periphery and some parsnip. Has lots of flavour too – grapefruit pulp and bitter peel – juicy and sapid, refreshing and mouth-sucking. Super-subtle mouth-aromas of prosciutto and parmesan. A fantastic price for a fabulous rizza. 93(94)/100, **\$17.99**

Vanguardist Wines C'est Facile Riesling 2016 [Clare Valley, SA] This smells a bit wild and uncontrolled, in a really exciting way. Mixed pulpy rind and yellow stonefruit kernel fruit; there's a woody, cedar-spicy note too. Has a plumpness and viscosity in the mouth, with grapefruit nectarine tanginess. Complex acid structure that breaks beautifully at the back of the palate, where it gets meally-nutty, tight and bitter. Yum and fun. 94/100, **\$24**
Grosset Polish Hill 2016 [Clare Valley, SA] Lime pith, gentle gardenia florals, and Thai baby pineapple tanginess. Has a tight Murray pink salt mouth-sucking texture, flavoured with dense lime and white nectarine fruit, which lingers long. This has the structure to age well. Wafts of lemon thyme and salty pith. Is charged with class. 94(96)/100, **\$55**

Out of 100 = empirical rating

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