

wine

canberra

Some capital reds come out of the Canberra District, writes Peter Bourne.

Photography Jennifer Soo

The Canberra District is one of Australia's newer wine regions but, as in politics, nothing is simple. Although the area carries the name of our national capital, most of the vineyards are not in the ACT but in NSW. Hence, its official title – the Canberra District of NSW.

The region's first plantings were in 1971 when Dr Edgar Reik put in vines on the foreshore of Lake George. Coincidentally, an Irish research scientist, Dr John Kirk, planted cabernet sauvignon and riesling near Murrumbateman, about 30 kilometres north-west of Canberra, in the same year. Kirk named his farm Clonakilla, added shiraz the next year and, in 1978, was one of the first Australian winegrowers to plant the obscure Rhône white variety viognier.

Fast-forward to 1991 when Kirk's young son, Tim, tasted the revered Rhône red Côte-Rôtie on a backpacking tour of France. On discovering that the wine's perfume and delicacy come from adding a splash of viognier to Côte-Rôtie's shiraz mainstay, Tim realised Clonakilla had both the ingredients to create an Australian red in the same style. Eight years later, Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier was hailed the NSW Wine of the Year.

Tim is now in his early 40s and, with a showcase full of awards, trophies and medals, he should be able to relax. But snapping at his heels is a bunch of young turks who are inspired by Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier and enamoured with Canberra District shiraz.

Up-and-coming name to look out for include Clonakilla assistant winemaker, Bryan Martin, who is also partner and winemaker at nearby Ravensworth Wines, at Murrumbateman. There's also Alex McKay, who came to Canberra as a winemaker for Kamberra Wines, a visionary operation owned by the US-based Constellation Group. The venture was ill-fated, leaving behind McKay – and a number of new vineyards planted with shiraz. McKay formed Collector Wines and started shovelling medals and awards into a trophy cabinet to rival Clonakilla's. Awarded the top wine prize in the NSW Wine Awards in 2007, he also picked up four trophies at the 2010 Sydney Royal Wine Show with his 2008 Collector Reserve Shiraz.

McKay is no showman; as he walked calmly to the Sydney Royal dais to receive his fourth trophy, a voice from the crowd cried, "Smile, Alex". Another colleague described him as being "as dry as a wind-blown leaf". All true but he sure makes great wine.

Nick O'Leary's eponymous wines are similarly impressive, with his 2008 Shiraz topping a regional roundup recently. The nephew of veteran South Australian winemaker David O'Leary, he is regardless running his own race.

There's another Nick on the scene, too – Nick Spencer, winemaker at Eden Road Wines, which are housed in the original Kamberra wine facility. The Eden Road Wines regional collection is marketed under the Long Road brand with fruit from the Canberra District, Tumbarumba and the Hilltops region, near Young. Spencer hit the limelight when his 2008 The Long Road Hilltops Shiraz won the coveted Jimmy Watson Award. At \$16.50, it was a snip – before it rapidly (and inevitably) sold out.

Shiraz is the mainstay of the Canberra District, be it solo or enhanced with viognier. As the region's pioneers fade away, Tim Kirk now stands centre stage – with a bunch of aspirants jostling in the wings. Look out, Tim.



2008 Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier, \$86

A striking purity of fruit sets the scene with lots of raspberry, dark cherry, white pepper and gamey characters interwoven with sweetly seductive Moroccan spice. A dash of viognier adds floral notes to the bouquet and helps soften the texture of the intense fruit tannins. This is a superb wine by any yardstick.



2008 Nick O'Leary Shiraz, \$28 (cellar door)

It's not often that the words subtle, fragrant, elegant, ethereal and velvety can be applied to a shiraz but they are appropriate descriptors for Nick O'Leary's '08 Shiraz. It's medium weight yet intensely flavoured with sweet spices and delicious red-fruit flavours. A fine tail of silky tannin carries the finish.



2008 Lake George Reserve Shiraz, \$47 (cellar door)

The Lake George vineyards are part of Edgar Reik's original plantings and a stylish cellar-door facility has recently been added. This is a dense and lushly flavoured shiraz, loaded with dark-berry fruits. Its superb tannin structure flows smoothly to a long, lingering finish.



2008 Collector Reserve Shiraz, \$47.50

This is Alex McKay's top wine and deservedly so. It's pure and bright with its sweet red-fruit flavours enhanced by savoury overtones, subtle spices and a delicious fragrance. Fine toned with great style and an incredible flavour length. Look out too for his Collector Marked Tree Shiraz – a bargain at about \$27.



2007 Ravensworth Shiraz Viognier, \$27

This is a superb example of this fashionable blend. Raspberry and dark-cherry aromas fill the nose with a background of sweet spices – star anise and cloves. The palate is fine and friendly with lots of soft red-berry fruits and gentle tannins paving the way to a clean, bright finish. A label to watch with interest.