



Written by
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Clonakilla Shiraz 2013 Hilltops

WINES OF THE WEEK AUSTRALIA SHIRAZ



This seriously fine wine is stunning value. Tim Kirk of Clonakilla is one of Australia's greatest exponents of terroir-driven Syrah. Having been grown in one of the cooler wine regions of New South Wales, this Hilltops Shiraz is nothing like the richer Shirazes of Barossa or McLaren Vale way to the west.

Kirk is the man who, unintentionally, inflicted a wave of over-Viognier-scented Shiraz on Australia because he pioneered co-fermentation of these two varieties in Australia. The result, his Shiraz/Viognier top bottling from the original vineyards round the winery in Canberra District, was and is so outstanding that everyone copied him.

Clonakilla's Shiraz/Viognier is widely recognised as one of Australia's finest wines and, for the record, Kirk thinks he has never made a finer vintage than the 2013. I loved the wine. Here's my tasting note:

Clonakilla Shiraz/Viognier 2013 Canberra District
 Vibrant and more ethereal than the Hilltops Shiraz. Beautifully structured. Very understated but with great balance. Such delicacy. The sort of wine you would love to give to someone who has doubts about Australian wine. 18/20 Drink 2017-30

But, the RRP of the Shiraz/Viognier is almost £80 whereas you can find today's wine of the week for about a quarter of this, it's already delicious, and I gave it only one less point, for what it's worth. Here's my note (VGV = very good value):

Clonakilla Shiraz 2013 Hilltops
 Dark crimson. Wonderful savour. Just so juicy and yet without sweetness. Lift and satisfyingly ripe, but not too ripe, fruit. Great stuff. VGV 17/20 Drink 2015-19

Yesterday we published a compilation from our team of tasting notes on [more than 200 Australian wines](#), many of them remarkably fine. Perceptions of Australian wine may be coloured by the cheapest and most cheerless offerings from God's Own Country but it would be a great shame to miss out on the best that Australia has to offer – not least because the Australian dollar is no longer as mighty as it was when the Chinese were Hoovering up Australia's raw materials.



The small family wine estate of Clonakilla owes its origins to the Hydro Hotel in Lisdoonvarna, a sleepy little settlement in Ireland's County Clare. Tim's grandparents owned it and required his father John to look after the cellar during the holidays. This kindled John's interest in wine so that when in 1968 he accepted a job as a plant biochemist with the CSIRO in Canberra, he decided to have a go at pioneering vine-growing there, on a 44-acre (18-ha) farm near Murrumbateman north of the nation's capital. His debut vintage was 1976. Initially the Shiraz was blended with Cabernet, as was the fashion in Australia then, but in 1990 they decided to bottle the Shiraz separately and the wine went on to be showered with medals and trophies.

It was in 1991 that Tim, the fourth of John's six sons, visited Côte Rôtie and came back to experiment with a co-fermented Shiraz/Viognier in 1992 (the picture above shows him in the winery then; he is much less hairy now). By 1999 the 1998 Shiraz/Viognier was voted New South Wales wine of the year, an accolade previously reserved for the plethora of Hunter Valley offerings, and it continues to be revered. Tim Kirk was voted Australian Winemaker of the Year by *Gourmet Traveller Wine* in 2013.

The first Hilltops Shiraz was made in 2000, from fruit grown on deep red loams over clay around Young, slightly lower and warmer than nearby Murrumbateman. The highly successful 2013 is the product of three growers' efforts in a relatively warm year. Vinification was conventional; no fashionable stems in the fermentation vat. Then 11 months in French oak, of which 15% was new. The wine was raked once and bottled in late February 2014.

This subtle bargain - 14% alcohol, pH 3.75 - is widely available from independent wine retailers in Australia and the UK and is also sold in Singapore and Hong Kong. My only sadness is how difficult it seems to be (from Wine-searcher.com anyway) to find Clonakilla's superb wines in the US. There seem to be a few US stockists of 2004 and 2008 Hilltops (two of the very few vintages I don't have notes on), and one Santa Rosa retailer is offering the 2013 Shiraz/Viognier for \$130, but otherwise Americans seem to be being deprived of this great producer of interest to those with a love of northern Rhône wines.

Clonakilla now also produce a varietal Viognier which is so far a little less impressive than their reds. And from 2006 Tim Kirk has been bottling tiny quantities of a wine he labels Syrah because of the particular character of the vineyards that grow it. He calls it his Hermitage to the Côte Rôtie character of his Shiraz/Viognier.

I have added a link to find any vintage of Hilltops Shiraz since I have consistently scored all vintages either 16.5 or, more usually, 17.