



## Spin the Bottle

# Canberra District

This month, we explore the cool-climate wine region near the nation's capital – visit the cellar doors, sample the food and stay a night or two.

STORY BY PETER BOURNE

IN THE Canberra District wine region, only a handful of vineyards are actually in the ACT (on Mount Majura and at Hall), while the vast majority are north of the capital in NSW. The region's epicentre is Murrumbateman, just 40 kilometres from Canberra on the way to Yass. And there's another cluster of wineries on the western flank of mysterious Lake George. Geographically confused? Possibly. Exciting nonetheless? Definitely.

This is a young wine region. In 1971, the first vines were planted by John Kirk at Clonakilla in Murrumbateman and at Lake George by the late Edgar Riek. They were among a cohort of wine-loving, scientific visionaries – many from CSIRO – who shaped the area. The vineyards are at elevations of 300 metres to more than 800 metres (at Lark Hill Winery, near Bungendore), which means warm summer days are moderated by cool nights and cold winters. This continental climate has proved to be perfect for riesling and shiraz.

Recognition of the Canberra District was initially slow, despite the enthusiasm of Ken Helm, who founded his eponymous winery in 1973. He zeroed in on riesling and it became the region's white flag-bearer. The Canberra International Riesling Challenge is now in its 18th year.

Although the region is justly renowned for riesling, it is most famous for one wine: the Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier. In 1986, through his CSIRO connections, John Kirk obtained cuttings of viognier – then an unheard-of grape in Australia – from the Northern Rhône. Five years later, his son, Tim, visited the Rhône Valley and, in his words, experienced an epiphany upon tasting E. Guigal's single-vineyard 1988 Côte-Rôtie at the winemaker's cellars. Tim set out to emulate this idiosyncratic blend of syrah (shiraz) and viognier and the result took out Wine of the Year NSW in 1999. Some consider it the best shiraz in Australia.

But there's more to the Canberra District than shiraz and riesling. New-wave varieties include a much-lauded grüner veltliner from Lark Hill and a tempranillo from Mount Majura Vineyard. Plus, the region is well served with quality cellar doors, good food and the capital city's many attractions.

Win-win: Wily Trout Vineyard shares a home with Poachers Pantry



## Tasting notes

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**LARK HILL  
GRÜNER  
VELTLINER**

2017 / \$45

Grüner veltliner comes from Austria, where it grows alongside riesling on the steep slopes by the Danube. So it's no surprise that both succeed on Lark Hill's equally precipitous site. This wine features aromas of lemongrass and honeydew melon, with a bright palate and a zesty, acid-defined finish. Enjoy it with scallop sashimi.

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**HELM PREMIUM  
RIESLING**

2016 / \$52

Ken Helm's daughter, Stephanie, crafted this fragrant gem, the pinnacle of Helm's five highly individual rieslings. Its lemon-pith and white-peach aromas, mouth-filling texture, generous citrus-infused flavours and scintillating acidity are well suited to a smoked-trout salad.

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**CLONAKILLA  
SYRAH**

2015 / \$96

Inspired by the concentrated syrah of the Rhône's Hermitage appellation, this is Tim Kirk's "Yang" to his shiraz viognier "Yin". It's deep and brooding, opening up in the glass to reveal an abundance of dark berries, a noble structure and decisive tannins. Roast beef with horseradish cream, please.

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**MOUNT MAJURA  
VINEYARD  
TEMPRANILLO**

2015 / \$45

Frank van de Loo takes inspiration from the Iberian Peninsula with this tempranillo (as well as his touriga and graciano). Black cherry and wild raspberries partner with a whiff of aniseed and mace. The 2015 vintage is quite robust, with the power, depth and length to match a lamb tagine.

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**RAVENSWORTH  
SHIRAZ  
VIOGNIER**

2016 / \$38

Bryan Martin makes an eclectic array of highly slurpable drops and his shiraz viognier is a wine of grace and finesse. Raspberry and red-cherry aromas mingle with star-anise and dried thyme. It's lithely framed yet very flavoursome and its gentle tannins would be ideal with an Asian crisp pork-belly dish.

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Nigel Lough