

RED FIZZ

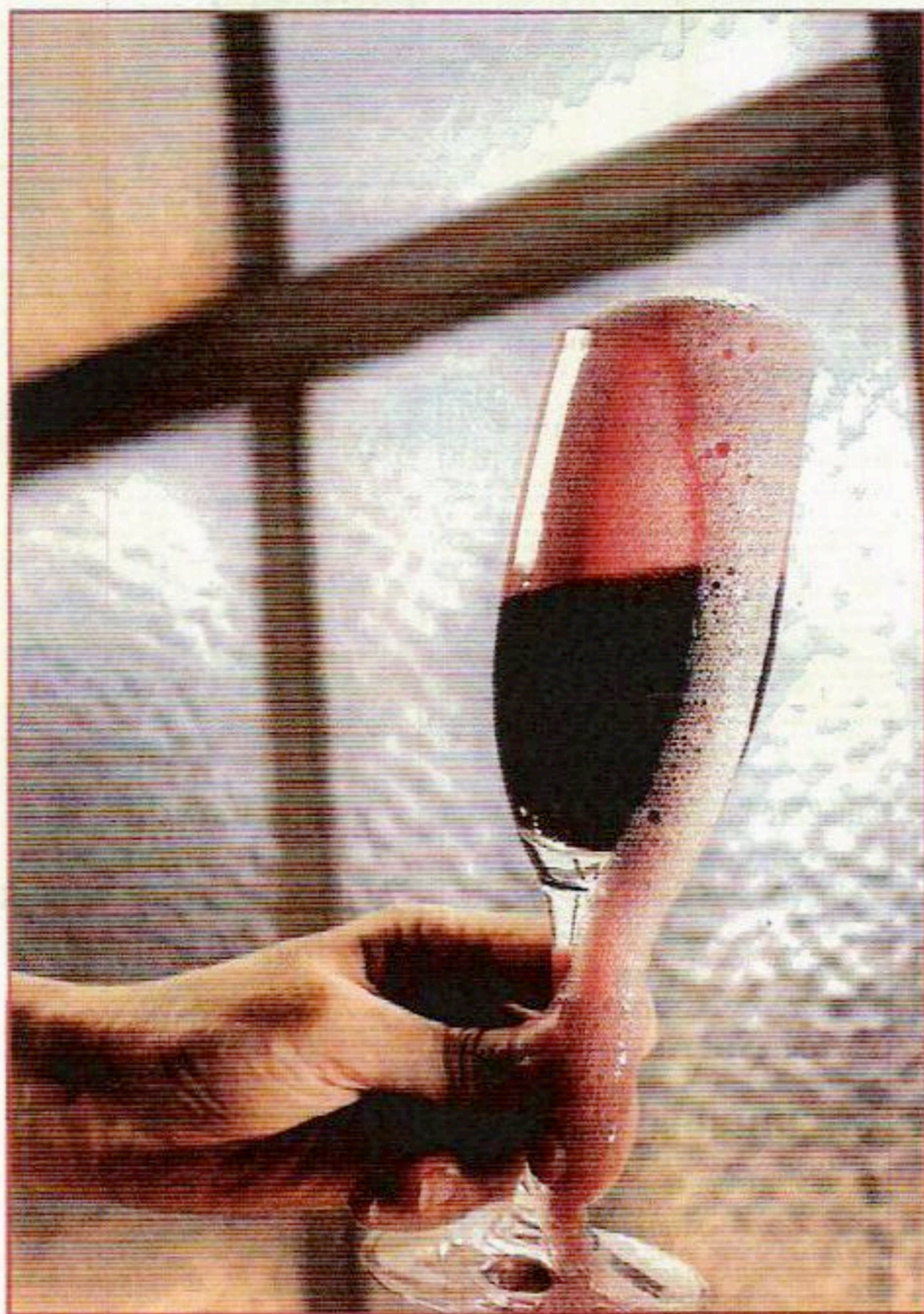


Photo by Craig Lee/The Chronicle and by Bruce Berman

Australian-style red bubbly is a grown-up pleasure

By W. Blake Gray
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Red sparkling wine? Red? That's silly — unless you're Australian.

Red bubbly is a winemaker's inside joke in Germany. Vintners changed the spelling of their name for it from "kalte ende" to "kalte ente" so the meaning would be "cold duck," rather than the more accurate "cold end" that reflects the leftover wines from which it's made there.

Red sparkling wine is a lightweight trifle in Italy and Portugal, sources of sweet fizzy red wines that peaked in popularity in the United States in the 1980s before their bubbles burst as American drinkers got all grown-up.

Leave it to Australia, a nation of jokesters, to take sparkling red wine seriously — or as seriously as they take anything Down Under.

"Back home, if you go to someone's house, the first wine out of everyone's fridge is a sparkling red," says Aussie native Mick Schroeter, now vice president and winemaker for Geysler Peak Winery in Geyserville.

The best Australian sparkling red wines can be astonishing to Americans who expect grape soda pop. First of all, they're dry. And they're not frothy lightweights. They have the character of

The Chronicle's Wine Selections: California Rhone Blends

& Misc. Red Varietals

Here are the panel picks from the 35 California Rhone blends and miscellaneous red varietals tasted for today

Wine	Price	Body	Dryness	Comments
2001 Epiphany Rodney's Vineyard Santa Barbara County Revelation Red	\$30	Medium-full	Dry-semidry	Big, juicy, very ripe style; dusky blackberry pie, berry jam, spice and anise nose; similar flavors; could use more structure; long finish. Low production.
2004 Frontler Red Lot No. 41 California Red Wine	\$10	Medium-full	Dry	Very good. Coffee nose with aromas and flavors of ripe juicy blackberry, dark cherry, currant, pencil lead, soy and baking spice; brisk acidity; clean, crisp, long finish.

Wattle Creek Winery is the other — whose product I tasted that even approaches the quality of good ones from Down Under. Not surprisingly, Geysler Peak and Wattle Creek both have Australian winemakers.

"When you grow up in the Barossa Valley, you get used to having it around," says Michael Scholz, winemaker for Wattle Creek in Cloverdale. "We like to drink it."



CRAIG LEE/The Chronicle

CALIFORNIA

1998 Geysler Peak Winery Sonoma County Sparkling Shiraz (\$30) — The best sparkling red made in California. Aromas of red plum, bacon and yeast. Flavors of red and black plum and black currant with a little apricot. Finish lengthens and flavor deepens after it's open an hour. Good level of effervescence.

NV Wattle Creek California Sparkling Shiraz (\$35) — Jammy blackberry aroma and flavor with notes of raspberry, earth and black pepper. Fruity, simple and likable, but beware the 15.5 percent alcohol.