Barossa owes much to Europe. Its name, cultural instincts, languages, food, viticultural and winemaking heritage, are all transportations that have been moulded and honed by 175 years of Australian innovation.
Barossa

One could be forgiven for thinking Barossa was settled by the Spanish. Its name can certainly be traced back to the windswept Barrosa Ridge in the Spanish region of Andalusia where in March 1811 Lieutenant General Thomas Graham of the British Army defeated the French Marshal Victor, during the Napoleonic Peninsular Wars.

Graham received a peerage and was named Lord Lynedoch but it was his young aide-de-camp Lieutenant William Light who was to remember the name. When he was appointed Surveyor General of the new colony of South Australia in 1836 and discovered a verdant valley he named it Barrosa – and a slip of the pen by a public administrator gave the region its unique name, Barossa.

However it was not Spanish but English and Silesian settlers who pioneered the region. The English, including the colony’s founder George Fife Angas, took over pastoral sheep and cattle runs in Eden Valley, east of Angaston; and the Silesian settlers – mainly peasant farmers and artisans fleeing Prussian religious persecution – settled the Valley floor at Bethany, Langmeil, Tanunda and Nuriootpa.

After experimenting with a range of crops, from flax to tobacco, the Silesians found the Mediterranean climate suited wine grapes.

Entrepreneurs with big visions built stone wineries and started making fortified “ports” and “sheries” as well as fine table wines called “claret” and “hermitage” and “burgundy”, paying homage to European tradition. Barossa became the largest wine-producing region in Australia by the turn of the century, sustaining a community of grapegrowers, winemakers, cellar hands and coopers and earning significant export income for the state of South Australia.

Through the 20th century Barossa had its booms and busts – Imperial demand crashed during both wars and in the post-war 1960s and 1970s customers wanted sweet sparkling wines such as Barossa Pearl and Cold Duck. Finally Barossa settled on what its soils and climate do best – ripening red wine grapes – and from the 1980s onwards its fame grew for its full bodied Shiraz and Cabernet, Grenache and Mataro.

In the late 1990s during an international boom in demand for Australian wine, the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation decided to define Australia’s regions along similar (but less restrictive) lines to Europe’s appellation system.

The Barossa’s winemaking geographic indication zone was formalised in 1997, comprising two regions: the warmer Barossa Valley “floor” specialising in red wine and the cooler, higher altitude Eden Valley, which focussed on fine white wines such as Riesling and Chardonnay as well as medium body reds such as Shiraz and Cabernet.

Now Barossa is the most recognised name in Australian winemaking, due to its forgiving viticultural environment, its treasure-trove of century old pre-phylloxera vines and its six generations of grapegrowing and winemaking heritage.

But it has also evolved over 175 years into much more than a wine region. Old Silesian cultural food traditions continue to be celebrated, such as the fermentation of meats into sausage and wursts; salting and smoking hams and bacon; the preservation of fruits and vegetables such as pickled onions and dill cucumbers and the maintenance of age old baking traditions: sour dough breads, pretzels and streuselkuchen.

There are also European music traditions still maintained such as brass bands and men’s and women’s choirs and Barossa continues to be the epicentre Lutheran faith in Australia with more than a dozen steepled churches dotted across the valleys.

This colourful culture has attracted thousands of new settlers over subsequent generations, continuing the immigration that started in the 1840s, making Barossa a vibrant, diverse and exciting contemporary Australian community.
Complacency is not something Barossa has ever struggled with. It could have easily rested on its laurels at points during its 175-year timeline, contented with its own pre-eminence in Shiraz and Cabernet, Eden Valley Riesling and ancient fortifieds. But like old European regions that continue to grow and develop, Barossa has never been satisfied with the status quo – its growers and winemakers and food producers are always on a quest for self-improvement and reinvention.

Through the 1990s and early 2000s there was a renaissance of respect for old varieties: certainly Shiraz, but also Grenache and Mataro (Mourvèdre) and Semillon. This rediscovery was a long overdue acknowledgement that these workhorses of the fortified era could indeed make fine varietal table wines of character, richness and length and they are now a well-established part of the Barossa wine list.

That rediscovery from within has continued as growers offer up small patches of old varieties that were once so worthless that they didn’t even waste the money to pull them out. The cows and sheep pruned them and the weeds grew around their feet until a new generation of winemakers asked the question.

Now Carignan, Touriga Nacional, Cinsault, Durif, Marsanne, Petit Verdot, Muscat-à-Petits Grains – exotic European varieties left over from an earlier fortified era – make fresh, textural white wines and medium to full bodied reds when deftly handled by innovative young winemakers.

But as well as this rediscovery of the past there has been the impetuous discovery of the new.

In many cases the drivers of this revolution have been winemakers, a curious bunch who work overseas vintages as a rite of passage and bring that international vigour back home to their wineries.

So Viognier from the south of France has emerged as a variety that revels in Barossa’s warm Mediterranean climate, producing a rich textural white wine that fits between Riesling and Chardonnay – or when blended in tiny quantities provides an aromatic lift and palate sweetness in Shiraz.

Growers, on the other hand, are driven by more earthly concerns. Climate change is real to these men and women of the soil and they know that for the eighth or ninth generation to continue they will need vines that can grow with lower winter rainfall and higher summer temperatures.

So to them a Mediterranean theme makes sense for more practical...
In old, established winegrowing regions such as the Barossa Valley, red grapes such as Mataro, Carignan and Cinsault, long considered second-rate varieties, are now sought after both for their savoury flavours and their suitability to hot, dry growing conditions. This resonates strongly with the rediscovery and promotion of heritage fruits and vegetables and rare breed animals championed by the Slow Food and farmers’ market movements…

– Max Allen, The Future Makers

“Discovery for our generation is not so much about reinventing the wheel or trying to start again... it’s about about polishing it, maintaining it and making it work better.”

– Fraser McKinley

reasons such as drought tolerance and fungal disease resistance, which is why varieties from Italy and Spain and Portugal – Sagrantino and Sangiovese, Tempranillo and Zinfandel and Savagnin and Roussane – are finding their way into Barossa vineyards.

The result of this experimentation is not a confused fruit salad, but rather a constantly evolving palette of flavours and textures and a mature realisation that time – and consumer taste – doesn’t stand still.

Learn more and watch videos at barossa.com/wine/barossa-chapters.
Barossa Varieties and Styles to Discover

Sparkling Red Wines
Due to the abundance of superb red grapes, sparkling red wine is far more prevalent in Barossa than sparkling white or rosé. Shiraz is the main variety used, however Merlot, Lagrein and Petit Verdot also feature. Typical wines display elegance and complexity, retention of their black fruit core, persistence and a lingering aftertaste.

Rosé
Barossa Rosé is a light- to medium-bodied style of wine using Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz or Grenache. Classic examples are made with no (or minimal) influence of oak or malolactic fermentation and are most commonly refreshing and bright with little or no residual sugar.

Other White Wines
Although Eden Valley Riesling is well known, as are other white varieties such as Chardonnay and Semillon, there are several additional varieties planted throughout the Barossa and Eden Valleys.

Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains (Frontignac)
Number six in terms of white grape vines planted in Barossa, with 61 hectares planted, mainly in Barossa Valley. This variety is generally made into a semi-sweet white table wine.

Gewürztraminer
An aromatic variety that is grown in the cooler Eden Valley region, with 19 hectares planted. High natural sugar results in wines that are usually made in an off-dry style with perfumed aromas.

Marsanne
Only a very small amount of Marsanne is grown in Barossa Valley, with 11 hectares planted, and is mostly used in blended wines with Roussanne and Viognier.

Pinot Gris
Grows best in cooler climates, hence most plantings are located in Eden Valley. 52 hectares in total are planted across Barossa making it the seventh most planted white variety. The wines vary in colour from pale straw to yellow to copper and even a light shade of pink due to this grape’s slightly pink coloured skin. Within Eden Valley, you will find wines labelled both Pinot Gris and Pinot Grigio, depending on the weight and texture of the wine, with crisper, lighter wines often labelled Pinot Grigio.

Sauvignon Blanc
One of the world’s most popular white varieties and there are 120 hectares in Barossa making it the fourth most planted white variety. The grapes are predominately blended with Semillon giving a wine ripe in flavour with white peach and lime notes.
Savagnin
Approximately four hectares planted in Barossa Valley and Eden Valley, and previously thought to be Albariño, this is a white grape variety with green-skinned berries. They are not high yielding, but are high quality, robust grapes that suit a range of climates. Savagnin has been compared to Pinot Gris in character with a similar acidity to Riesling. The grapes produce a quite fruity, dry white with a touch of acid, aromatic floral notes and good texture.

Viognier
Barossa is Australia’s largest producer of Viognier with 99 hectares planted, making several styles of white varietal wine and used in Shiraz blends to add another dimension and more complexity to the wine. Grown in both Barossa and Eden Valleys, it is a low yielding variety. If picked too early, the grape fails to develop the full extent of its aromas and tastes. When picked too late, the grape produces wine that is oily and lacks perfume. It is also prone to powdery mildew. Apricot dominates the bouquet and palate with a viscous mouth-feel and flavour that lingers after the wine has been swallowed.

Other Red Wines
It remains to be seen as to which of these varieties will stand the test of time, and what other varieties will be tried in the endless drive for new and exciting wine experiences.

Barbera
A red Italian wine grape variety known for its deep colour, low tannins and high levels of acid. Often used in blends, Barbera from the region can exhibit an attractive ripe aroma of red fruit, currants or blackberries that can be enhanced by vanilla, smoky or toasty notes added during barrel maturation.

Cabernet Franc
Like so many varieties planted in Australia, Cabernet Franc first arrived in James Busby’s collection, eventually making its way to South Australia. Principally grown in Barossa Valley for blending with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, this variety contributes colour and a peppery aroma to blends. There is 33 hectares planted across Barossa.

Malbec
A thin-skinned grape that needs more sun and heat than either Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot to mature. It ripens mid-season and can bring very deep colour, ample tannin and a particular plum-like flavour component to add complexity to red wine blends. In Barossa Valley, the grapes are mostly used to blend with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Only 26 hectares are planted in Barossa Valley.

Merlot
Preferring the cooler sites within the Barossa and Eden Valleys, Merlot is mostly used in blended wines, however there are some outstanding varietal wines from Eden Valley. In blends the Merlot contributes softness and roundness. Varietal wines display mulberry and plum flavours. Merlot is the fourth most planted red variety in Barossa with 407 hectares of vineyards, the majority of which are in Barossa Valley.

Petit Verdot
Principally used in blends, Petit Verdot ripens much later than other varieties and adds tannin, colour and flavour to a blend. It has attracted attention among winemakers in Barossa Valley, where it ripens more reliably and can be used to ‘stiffen’ the mid-palate of Cabernet Sauvignon blends. 26 hectares are planted, mainly in Barossa Valley.

Tempranillo
Tempranillo grows well in Barossa with 111 hectares planted, mainly in Barossa Valley. The resulting wines are ruby red in colour with aromas and flavours of berries, plum, tobacco, leather and herb. Sometimes bottled as varietal wines, Tempranillo is also used in blends where the low sugar and acid create a vibrant, textural mouth-feel.

Touriga Nacional
Touriga’s spicy character makes it well suited to fortified wine production in Barossa and in recent years some makers have enjoyed exploring its suitability to varietal wines. These wines tend to have intense colour, aromatics of spice and floral notes, with high tannins and concentrated flavours of sweet fruit and spice.

Due to its strength of character, Petit Verdot can have a significant impact on a blend, even when used in small proportions.

Sangiovese
This variety was only introduced to Australia in the late 1960s and even later to Barossa. 29 hectares are planted, mainly in Barossa Valley. Young wines from the region tend to have fresh, fruity flavours of strawberry and spice.

Source of vineyard data:
SA Winegrape Crush Survey 2017,
Wine Australia July 2017