

Clare Valley

While Clare Valley has developed the reputation of being one of Australia's premier Riesling growing regions, more red varieties are planted than white.



The complex climate and varied topography allow for Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon to excel.

4,289ha Total vineyard area
300-500m Altitude
33° 50'S Latitude
250mm Growing season rainfall
21.9°C Mean temperature (Jan)
1770 Heat degree days

White 28% Red 72%

Top varieties grown in Clare Valley



Riesling

This variety has become synonymous with Clare Valley. The typical style is quite restrained and austere when young with lime and mineral notes. Most benefit from 5–7 years of bottle age and can evolve for decades. Clare Riesling represents 20% of total Riesling crushed each year in Australia.

Shiraz

Clare Valley Shiraz is typically full flavoured with ripe blackberry, spice and mint characteristics. The strong diurnal temperature shifts allow for acid retention and vibrant fruit quality.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Also does very well in Clare displaying dark, rich black fruit characters with firm but plush tannins. Often blended with Shiraz and sometimes a little **Malbec**

Climate

The temperature data is often said to be very misleading due to the large diurnal variation

Drops of temperatures from 40°C during the day to 1°C at night are common during main ripening months

Altitude and aspect within the valley important

Protection from or exposure to cooling maritime breezes

Soil

11 different recognised soil types

Polish Hill is known for broken slate

Watervale has limestone in sub-soils

Within Australian wines 65 regions are areas that as beautiful as they are bountiful. One such area, hidden away in Mount Lofty Ranges in the southeast corner of South Australia is the Clare Valley.

Around two hours' drive north of Adelaide, Clare Valley offers visitors the opportunity to step back in time and experience the slower pace of a lifestyle that has seen many changes over the centuries. Old stone buildings and majestic gum trees dot the landscape of rolling green hills against a deep blue sky. Evidence of agricultural and mining prosperity can still be seen in Clare Valley's historic buildings and sprawling homesteads like Martindale Hall in Mintaro, an outstanding example of Georgian architecture. Before European settlement, the Aboriginal people of the Ngadjuri tribe occupied the land in and around the Clare Valley. One of the area's first white settlers in the early 1840s was English pastoralist and explorer, John Horrocks. Edward (Paddy) Gleeson soon followed, establishing the town of Clare, naming it after his home county in Ireland and planting the first vines. The hardworking pioneers who were attracted to the region established prosperous industries of mining and farming so that by the mid-1800s, the Clare Valley township of Burra boasted the world's largest copper mine. Today, unlike many wine regions that have been heavily commercialised, the Clare Valley retains the core of its relaxed, rural character, providing a window to the past and a sedate pace that is the perfect antidote to the city lifestyle.

One Valley – five wine sub regions

The Clare Valley is made up of five distinct sub regions: Auburn, Watervale, Sevenhill, Polish Hill River and Clare. The styles produced in each region reflect the influence of climate, soil and geography. Although the Clare Valley accounts for only around 3% of Australian wine production, it has a well-deserved reputation for premium wines of quality and consistency.

Clare Valley climate

The geographical advantages that made the Clare Valley such a lucrative farming and agricultural region now provide the basis for high-quality wine production. The Clare enjoys a warm, moderate continental climate, with warm to hot summer days moderated by cooling afternoon and night breezes. This diurnal variation, where night temperatures plummet, helps keep the average temperature lower and gives vines respite from the heat of the day, slowing ripening and adding complexity – especially to aromatic vines such as Riesling. This is an essential part of what gives Clare Valley wines their intensity, structure and balance. Relatively low humidity also means there's very low risk of fungal disease, resulting in clean, high quality grapes. Rainfall arrives in winter, kick-starting the soil for the dry growing season ahead.

Clare Valley soils: quality at the core

Soils in the Clare Valley are free-draining and most hold enough water to sustain vines, though in some areas minimal irrigation is needed and even then only in the hottest months of the year. Dry-grown Clare Valley grapes deliver a great intensity of flavour and colour, striking the perfect balance of fruit, acid and sugar ripeness. Pockets of the Clare Valley, like Watervale, hold classic terra rossa topsoil over limestone, similar to that found in South Australia's famed Coonawarra. Polish Hill River vines are planted in grey loam soil over sandstone interspersed with broken slate. Vineyards in the northern Clare Valley are grown in deep, fertile alluvial soils, while areas in the west are planted to sandy loam dotted with fragments of quartz.

Clare Valley wine styles

While the Barossa Valley may be known as the heartland of Australian Shiraz, Clare Valley is the home of Australian Riesling, famed for its rich, full-flavoured style with distinctive characters of lime zest, white blossom, low sugar and tart acidity. Clare Valley Riesling was brought to fame by winemakers such as Leo Buring, Jim Barry, Mitchell, Leasingham (formerly Stanley Wine Estates), Annie's Lane, Knappstein, Paulett and Taylors. Minerality and outstanding purity are key indicators of top quality Clare Valley Riesling. In great vintages these wines can age for decades, taking on toasted bread, honey and buttery characters with maturity. Australia's nearest competitor for the king of Riesling title is the Eden Valley. Clare Valley also produces Chardonnay with strong varietal melon and peach definition, slightly riper than Chardonnay from cooler regions like the Adelaide Hills. Clare Valley Semillon shows an interesting take on the varietal, usually lightly oaked and with a generous, rounded profile of citrus and tropical fruit. Mt Horrocks, Mitchell and Tim Adams make notable examples of Clare Valley Semillon. For a region so famed for its delicate, feather-light Rieslings, it can come as a surprise that Clare Valley is also home to full-bodied, decadently rich red wines. The warm climate helps red grapes reach ideal ripeness to gain immense concentration, depth of flavour and clear varietal character. Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec are Clare Valley's most famous red blends perfected by producers including Leasingham with their revered Bin 56, and Wendouree, rated 'Outstanding' in Langton's Fine Wines classification. Clare Valley Cabernet and Cabernet blends are recognisable by their juicy blackcurrant fruit with minty, eucalypt hints, dark chocolate, cigar box and smoky oak. Clare Valley Shiraz is a plush, deep style that's rich in blackberry fruit with subtle black pepper hints and an almost creamy texture. Up-and-coming varietals showing great promise in Clare Valley include Pinot Gris, Sangiovese and Tempranillo – Tim Adams Tempranillo Grenache blend is a particular star of this show.

Following the Riesling trail

With the shift from mining and grazing, and after suffering extensive bushfire damage in 1983, the railway line through Clare Valley fell into disuse. In 1993 it was reborn as the Riesling Trail, with the train tracks removed and the surface compacted and smooth – perfect for cycling, walking and running. The Riesling Trail follows the contours and curves of the old train line from Mt Horrocks at Auburn through to the township of Clare and 10 kilometres north to Barinia Road, White Hut. Along the way there are picnic tables and information boards revealing the region's history.

The screwcap revolution

It was the winemakers of Clare Valley, keen to retain the pristine freshness and vitality of their Riesling, who drove the screwcap revolution in Australia. The first trails had been instigated the 1970s by Yalumba with Pewsey Vale Riesling and Orlando, who bottled a batch of John Vickery's Richmond Grove Riesling under screwcap – a bold move at a time when consumers were convinced that screwcaps meant 'cheap and nasty'. Encouraged by the test results, 13 Clare Valley winemakers banded together in 2000 to champion the Stelvin screwcap closure for their premium Rieslings. The consistency, freshness and vitality of the screwcap-sealed wines appealed to consumers, and screwcaps soon became part of everyday Australian wine. Those far-sighted Clare Valley winemakers even inspired New Zealand winemakers to start bottling their wines under screwcap.

Clare Valley wineries

Many long-standing, historic producers have created a lasting framework of high quality wine production in Clare Valley that is enhanced by a network of boutique producers who are passionate about retaining the region's reputation. Clare Valley's first winery was Sevenhill Cellars, established in 1851 by the Jesuits to provide work for studying priests and generate income for the church. From its humble beginnings producing sacramental wine, today under the guidance of Brother John May (AM) and winemaker Liz Heidenreich, Sevenhill remains one of Clare Valley's historical, enduring wine treasures. In Langton's Fine Wines classification of Australian Wine, three Clare Valley wines have earned the 'Exceptional' award, reserved only for the most sought-after, first-growth type wines in Australia: Grosset Polish Hill Riesling, Wendouree Shiraz and Jim Barry The Armagh Shiraz. Wendouree continues a legacy of tradition, making wines from very old vineyards first planted in 1893. The grapes are handpicked and create cult wines that age for decades. Wendouree's sought-after classics are produced in limited quantities and only available by mailing list. Meeting Jeffrey Grosset at his winery in Auburn in the southern Clare Valley it's clear to see how his eye for perfection, intense concentration and sharp focus translates into wines of purity and definition. Grosset Polish Hill Riesling is one of the most revered collectable examples of the pristine Clare Valley style. Also putting Auburn on the map is winemaker Stephanie Toole with her highly acclaimed Mt Horrocks range from certified organic vineyards. Visitors to the cosy cellar door in the old Auburn railway station (the start of the Riesling Trail) can taste exemplary Riesling, Semillon, Cabernet Sauvignon and Nero d'Avola, along with one of Australia's finest dessert wines, a cordon cut Riesling made from grapes that have are cut from the vine but left to raisin and intensify in flavour and sweetness. It's Stephanie's critical eye that ensures the style retains its impeccable balance. After managing the historic Leasingham winery, winemaker Kerri Thompson's passion led her to establish her own label, wines by KT. Showcasing her love of Riesling, the wines by KT range includes Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo and Grenache. James Halliday describes Kerri's exotic off-dry wild-fermented Melva Riesling as having a "kaleidoscopic palate". After graduating with a Bachelor of Wine Science at Charles Sturt University in 1981, Winemaker Tim Adams worked as winemaker at Stanley Wine Company in Clare Valley learning from K.H. Knapstein (Mr Mick) at the historic Leasingham winery. Years later in 2001, Tim and wife Pam were lucky enough to honour Mr Mick's memory and acquire the original Leasingham winery, now home to the Mr Mick Cellar door and Kitchen, one of the Clare Valley's most visited cellar doors. Nestled in the Springfarm valley between stalwart winery Wendouree and Tim Adams' long-established Aberfeldy vineyard, at Adelina wines Col McBryde and Jennie Gardner follow a relentlessly creative path, turning out handpicked, estate-grown Riesling, Shiraz, and Shiraz/Mataro from nothing more than a low-tech rustic shed. Damon Koerner's family have been growing grapes in the Clare Valley for decades, inspiring him and younger brother Jonathan (Tim Adams' nephews) to launch Koerner wines in southern Clare Valley. Their aim is to create wines that buck tradition: skin contact, foot-stomped or basket-pressed grapes, oxidation, fermentation in concrete qvevri, lees maturation and minimal sulphur. Some of Koerner's stars include Tempranillo nouveau, Sangiovese Grenache, and a textured, aromatic skin contact Vermentino Riesling.

Clare Valley – a tradition of innovation