

Chapter 8

Grapes and wine

The grapes that were planted by the early settlers usually grew well, leading to predictions of a bright future for an Australian wine industry. However, this country did not become a major producer, consumer and exporter of wine until late in the 20th century. Dried vine fruits were first produced on a significant scale in the 1890s and were a far more valuable export than wine for most of the 20th century. Fresh grapes were one of the first fruits to become available to the early settlers and have contributed to national fruit consumption ever since; recently, they have been exported too.

The development of grape growing in Australia

The early days

The colonies were well supplied with grape varieties at an early stage in their development, as they were with other fruits and vegetables. Grape cuttings were obtained from Cape Town by the First Fleet and by many later settlers; more formally, the Sydney Botanic Gardens received 800 cuttings (13 varieties) from their Cape counterpart in 1824.¹ But by far the most extensive of the early introductions were those arranged by James Busby, ‘the prophet of Australian viticulture’.² He collected over 600 vine cuttings in France and Spain between September and December 1831 (some in England too), of which about 360 reached Sydney alive.³ Their packing had been supervised by Richard Cunningham before he left Kew to become director of the Sydney Gardens, which subsequently became the main centre for the multiplication and distribution of this valuable collection (Busby had left for New Zealand in 1833). By 1838, over 3000 cuttings had been provided to botanic gardens in other colonies and to various individuals, including the Macarthurs.⁴

Busby’s collection included almost all of the elite French wine varieties plus others that were to become important later for drying (muscat gordo blanco) and distillation (doradillo). Besides the set in the Botanic Gardens, duplicates had been planted at Kirkton in the Hunter Valley (some of those vines were still there in 1911; the ones in the Gardens had been grubbed out long ago). Laffer says in *The Wine Industry of Australia* that representative samples of Busby’s material were sent to Clare and the Barossa and that the cuttings used to plant Reynella in 1843 and 1844 were almost certainly from New South Wales.⁵ However, there were many additional introductions: Dr Penfold arrived in South Australia with cuttings from the south of France (mostly of grenache), while Johann Gramp brought riesling from Germany; in Victoria, the cuttings that Paul de Castella planted in the Yarra Valley in 1860 (chiefly of cabernet sauvignon) had been