

# An Emerging Band of Brothers

THE TASTING PANEL goes retail with Brothers in Arms, a surprising wine brand from South Australia's virtually unknown Langhorne Creek region



The plan was to meet up with James Hall, the General Manager of Sales and Marketing for Brothers in Arms, an Australian wine brand that has been recently re-introduced to the U.S. market. Hall was arriving on an early flight from Oz, and our first stop was John & Pete's, a fine wine and spirits landmark retailer in West Hollywood, CA.

When I arrived, Hall had not yet appeared, so I took some time to talk to the store's knowledgeable and much respected wine buyer, David Griffith. What occurred next was almost too uncanny to be called coincidence. As we were talking, a customer was pondering some selections in the aisle next to us.

"I'm looking for Australian Shiraz," said the well-dressed shopper, "something that's re-

ally good but not too pricey."

Griffith walked with him over to a section that showcased a variety of labels, vintages and price points.

Now I had a good start for this meeting. Griffith admitted he wasn't familiar with Brothers in Arms, but stated that, in general, Australian wines were not moving; in fact, the category was going down, quickly. Was it the humungous Aussie reds with high scores that, after the boom years, were now flat-lining? Was it the effect of "menagerie syndrome"—the over-development of bland, inexpensive liquids with cute, circus-like labels?

But perhaps that is a generalization. Australia offers diversity—in price and wine profiles. It is a proven statement that the Aussie's \$12-\$15 price category is growing in double digits. Wines that express regional character—whether from McLaren Vale, Clare Valley, the Barossa, or Langhorne Creek—all have their nuances; labels such as Molly Dooker, Layer Cake and R Wines are best-sellers even though they don't come from the "big producers."

A primary source for the country's wine decline was the consumer's reaction to some of the \$10 and under category wines, which lacked character due to lowered production costs and thus quality.

I felt a tinge of anxiety; even though I was not selling Brothers in Arms, I began to anticipate a negative reaction that would turn out to be uncomfortable for all of us.

When James Hall walked into the store, his face was beaming despite the 12-hour flight,

the lack of morning coffee and an hour in post-rush-hour tie-ups from LAX. Guided by my enthusiastic smiles, Griffith relaxed and tasted the wines, generously taking the time to hear Hall's story.

In South Australia, an hour outside Adelaide, the Langhorne Creek region is not just relatively unknown—it's downright obscure. "There are plenty of people in the wine business in Australia who haven't heard of it," claims Hall, who now heads up the area's first marketing group, a whopping dozen winemakers whose goal is clear: to raise the region's profile and status.

"It's an old area with emerging brands," he explains, comparing Langhorne Creek's cooler, air-conditioned maritime climate to that of the Sonoma Coast, versus the warmer inland region of Adelaide, with a climate that is the Down Under equivalent of northern Napa Valley.

"We only have a couple of chances to impress the wine buyer or the consumer," he



**Joe Tran's successful Vendome Liquors in Toluca Lake is powered by a staff of trained palates. "Each wine salesperson has a different preference in style," Tran points out. "That helps us tremendously in finding the right wines for our customers."**

Tran is enamored with the **Brothers in Arms 2004 "No.6,"** which estate owners the Formby family named for its sixth generation of future growers/winemakers (who are presently five and eight years old). "I'm surprised," Tran announces. "I'm surprised to not get the high alcohol I was expecting; surprised with its opulent aroma and intense flavor, with its subtle mint. And most of all, I am surprised at the price." (SRP \$22)



David Griffith is the wine buyer at John & Pete's in West Hollywood, CA, a store that carries a wide array of labels and has a reputation for high-volume sales. "The fruit in this wine is intensely plush," he offers, with a nod and a gesture toward the **Brothers in Arms 2002 Shiraz** (SRP \$35–\$38).

notes. That's statistically correct, the experts say, but it's not the end of the story. "The dollar is one-third off from last year and the value factor comes into play for the U.S. on a positive note: Our costs are down, and we relay that to our customer."

Cherry-picking only 25 percent of the best fruit the 700-acre family-owned estate has to offer (the remaining fruit is sold to premium wine companies and labels) and holding wines back to age in the bottle also form part of the impressive process at Brothers in Arms.

While Shiraz shines in Langhorne Creek, Hall and his compatriots foresee a bright future for Cabernet Sauvignon. "The stars are evolving here," he remarks, "and we reach our profile in our reds: balance, structure and texture. The Cabs from here are just outstanding."

A few more on-premise stops followed, with similar results. By the end of the day, I knew that my initial qualms were unfounded. Brothers in Arms was proving to be just the ticket that American buyers—and their customers—are looking for at this point in time. As someone once said: There are no coincidences. —Meridith May

*Brothers in Arms is imported and marketed by Vintage Point. [www.VintagePoint.com](http://www.VintagePoint.com)* ■