

En Route For Wine

MAR 21, 2014 by HUON HOOKE in WINE NEWS
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Route du Van looks like badly-spelled French, but in fact it's a quirky, fun wine label created by a couple of Aussies. Ian Bird and Tod Dexter met while studying wine at Roseworthy College in 1981. Dexter

makes wine on the Mornington Peninsula where he has his own vineyard and the Dexter label. Bird worked in wine wholesaling in Melbourne for many years before moving to Oxford, England where his wife Ruth is a librarian at the university.

When Ian and Tod met at Roseworthy they had both just returned from their own 'routes du vin', travelling the wine roads and learning about wine – Ian in Europe, Tod in the US. Tod had been skiing in Colorado and when the snow melted, wondering what to do next, landed a job at Cakebread winery in the Napa Valley, where his passion for wine grew.

Later on the Birds, with Ian's brother David and his wife Marie, decided to buy a house together in Cordes-sur-Ciel, a beautiful hilltop bastide town in Gaillac, south-western France. They renovated it and now, named La Maison des Oiseaux (what else!), it's a B&B as well as their own private retreat.

The Birds and the Dexters (Tod and his wife Debbie) spent many good times at Cordes exploring the French countryside and enjoying the food and local wines. This was where the idea for Route du Van grew. Ian and Tod decided to try to make something similar to those simple French country wines in Australia, with Dexter

as consultant winemaker. Thus Route du Van was born – a small range of red and white wines, modestly priced at under \$20.

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In an effort to achieve a kind of savouriness and character that's not typical of Australian wine, they opted to blend: dolcetto and shiraz (**tasting**) from the King and Alpine Valleys for the red; Yarra Valley sauvignon blanc and semillon for the white. The idea is for easy-drinking, everyday wines that go with food.

The fun element is epitomized by the label, which is a collage of Aussie symbols such as a utility, a thong, corrugated iron, a piece of four-by-two, and a map of Australia. The back-label is in the form of a postcard with a wattle stamp, explaining the wine inside. The top of the screwcap shows a car fuel-gauge indicating 'Full', reinforcing the idea of travel. The package, by Sydney-based **Collective Design Group**, won third place in Harper's Design Awards in London. The wines are exported to the UK, the US and Norway. In NSW, they're distributed by Winestock.

Since the original Route du Van wines in 2010, a second, cheaper range with a grungy ‘street art’ label has evolved, priced at \$14.95. Again, these are a lot of fun and are being served by the glass in New York City bars.

Another new addition to the range is a 2013 Heathcote shiraz, excellent value and still under the magic \$20 ceiling. But perhaps Route du Van’s best value for money is the Street Art 2013 King Valley Shiraz Cabernet (\$14.95), which is both ripe and savoury – and very quaffable.

www.routeduvan.com

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