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Route du Van Dolcetto Shiraz 2012: perfect with roast duck. Photograph: Michael Whitaker for the Guardian

You'll have to forgive me a very personal column this week. A good friend in the wine trade, Yvonne May, died of leukaemia a couple of weeks ago at the age of 53. I'd heard she was ill, but never imagined she wouldn't pull through. Her last email to me was characteristically cheery, funny and positive. I can't believe I won't see her again

She headed up [Wine Australia](#), the promotional body for Australian wine in this country – a tough task, to be honest. The oceans of Australian wine you see in the supermarkets are pretty dull these days, but Yvonne was a passionate advocate for Aussie wine for over 20 years and was convinced she could get people excited about it again.

I went to one of the tastings her team had set up based on

wines that had been nominated by the trade as the ones had most inspired them. What struck me was how few conformed to the stereotypes of oaky chardonnays and blockbuster reds. Two syrahs, for example (note "syrah", rather than shiraz) could easily have come from the Rhône: Luke Lambert's gorgeous, scented Yarra Valley Syrah 2012 (£165 for six bottles, or £27.50 a bottle, including delivery, from [Indigo Wine](#), £41 [Bottle Apostle](#), or £36.90 online; 13% abv) that shares some of the Yarra pinots' beguilingly sweet fruit and silky texture; and the excitingly smoky, spicy [Sutton Grange Estate Syrah](#) (£26.70 Tanners; 14% abv), from Bendigo. Both come from Victoria, rather than shiraz's normal heartlands of the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale.

Neither, of course, is cheap. Riesling aside, there are few bargains in Australia these days. The country's buoyant economy has resulted in a very unfavourable (to the UK) exchange rate, with the Australian dollar up by 50% against the pound since 2005. Many of the wines that featured at the tasting are made in very small quantities by boutique producers. Fine wines from Australia are as expensive to make as they are anywhere else.

That said, there is a middle ground at the £10-15 mark, where one can find wines of real character. For instance, the juicy [Route du Van Dolcetto Shiraz 2012](#) (£10.95 [The Wine Society](#); 13% abv), which was apparently made to match with wood-fired pizza, and the almost rioja-like [Plan B Shiraz Tempranillo 2010](#) (14% £11.50 [Wine Society](#), £12.35 [Fareham Wine Cellar](#); 14% abv), "an orgy of bright red berries and yummy fruit" as the producer puts it. I'm sure Yvonne would have enjoyed the idea of a berry orgy.