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***The new red center***

***Will Heathcote's reputation survive its changed borders?***

Heathcote, the central Victorian wine region, has for years been in the process of splitting away from the larger region of Bendigo, with which it had been associated.

Heathcote had decided to make the bread for independence because its wines, particularly shiraz made from grapes grown in the deep red Cambrian soils that are found running right up through the middle of the region, were not only becoming increasingly sought after, but also being recognized as tasting different to the wines of Bendigo.

Indeed, some observers tip Heathcote as the very best place in Australia for full-blooded red wine (an opinion I share, as I've written previously, if I ever give in to the urge to make wine myself, Heathcote's where I'd go).

How things have changed. In just three years the vineyard area within the region's boundary has more than quadrupled from about 300 to well over 1500 hectares of vines, and most of the growth is a result of just two huge new vineyards, each comprising hundreds of hectares of vines, that have been established up in the northern end of the region by Brown Brothers and Southcorp.

The region's growers also have been involved in an at-times acrimonious dispute over just where the Heathcote region begins and ends – whether the name should apply to a small area around the township of Heathcote itself (where most of the older, smaller vineyards are located), or whether it should also encompass a larger area, including the warm, dry, flat red soil up near Rochester in the north, where the big new vineyards are.

A couple of months ago, the Geographical Indications Committee of the Wine and Brandy Corporation decided to reject the smaller boundary argument and has ruled that, pending appeals, "Heathcote" will from now on refer to the larger region. Now that the boundary issue has been settled, though, questions remain about the future of Heathcote's reputation.

Some of the more established smaller growers, for example, are concerned that the new irrigated vineyards in the warmer north, run by more commercially minded, larger companies, might produce less-than-excellent wines, thus eroding the quality image built by producers such as Jasper Hill, Wild Duck Creek and Red Edge in the south.

In Heathcote, as in any other region, how heavily you allow your vines to crop has a direct impact on quality. As a general rule, the heavier the crop, the lower the quality, the more dilute the flavours, and the longer it takes to ripen fruit.

Conversely, ensuring a low crop through selective pruning and minimal or no irrigation produces earlier-ripening grapes and wines with more concentration and flavour. And as the strength of Heathcote's shiraz lies (for me) in the uncommon

depth of colour and flavour in the red wines, low yields are paramount in ensuring quality.

It is, of course, very early days. Brown Brothers picked the first commercial crop this year from its Patricia's vineyard in Heathcote. This vineyard was always intended to boost existing labels such as Brown Brothers' Victorian shiraz, but the cool conditions at flowering last year resulted in low yields of excellent quality. Whether this quality will convince Brown Brothers to keep the yields down and perhaps release a specific Heathcote label in the future remains to be seen.

Next week I'll look in detail at three Heathcote shirazes that have just been released or are on the verge of release; all three will only add to the ongoing debate over the region's reputation.