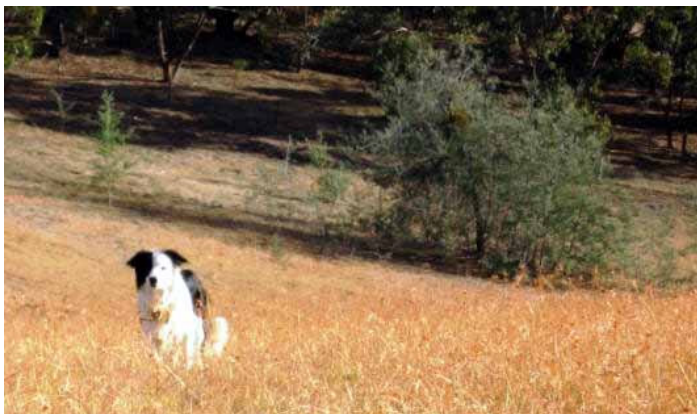




We had arranged to have dinner with [Dave Milne](#) at [Warrenmang Vineyard and Resort](#). I had met Dave on a previous trip and found him to be very helpful and hospitable.

When we arrived at the winery, we handed over our older wines so they could be decanted. Dave grabbed a bottle of what looked suspiciously like some FRS and some glasses and then we piled into a borrowed company



“Limousine” for a short trip up the hill. After this morning's exercise, I am damn glad he didn't make us

walk, although his dog either ran beside us, or played scout to make sure we didn't get lost. Who needs a satellite navigation system with a dog like that! For those who are old enough to remember, the Border Collie's name is Alvin, after Alvin Purple, which can only lead one to wonder what sort of debauched youth Dave had!

Border Collie's are known for their intelligence, and Alvin is no exception. In the 2005 vintage, Alvin lived up to his surname and worked out the purple juice spilling out of the fermenters was lovely and sweet. The problem was that some of it was fairly alcoholic. So now, during vintage, either he is not allowed to come to work or someone has to keep a very close eye on him.



The complex was started almost 19 years ago by [Luigi Bazzani](#), making him one of the pioneers of wine and tourism in the district. In those days, interest rates were about 17% and Luigi was known as Mr Optimistic. At the rate (bad pun intended) things are currently going in Australia with interest rate rises and the difficulty of moving wine, things could be going full circle and there may be many more Mr Optimistics.

The four-wheel-drive rattled and jolted up the track until we reached the summit. What a view! We stood then admiring the view, although the wind was blowing a gale. If you think I'm

exaggerating, I recorded our conversation on my digital recorder but the wind was so strong that it literally blew most of the words away. No kidding.

The unlabelled bottle, or "clean skin", was in fact a **Warrenmang 2000 Sparkling Shiraz**. When the wine was made, a pallet of it somehow got lost and despite looking for it, it could not be found. Recently some pallets of stock were moved and there it was; much to the delight of all concerned. The wine showed a lovely combination of aged, leathery characters with vibrant and fresh blackberry liqueur fruit below it. The wine was very savoury with just a touch of residual sweetness.

According to Dave, this wine was a saviour for him. In his past position, he worked in a Queensland winery that made a Sparkling Merlot that was terrible, and that turned him off sparkling reds until he got the Warrenmang and tasted something decent. Sparkling Merlot? Yuck!

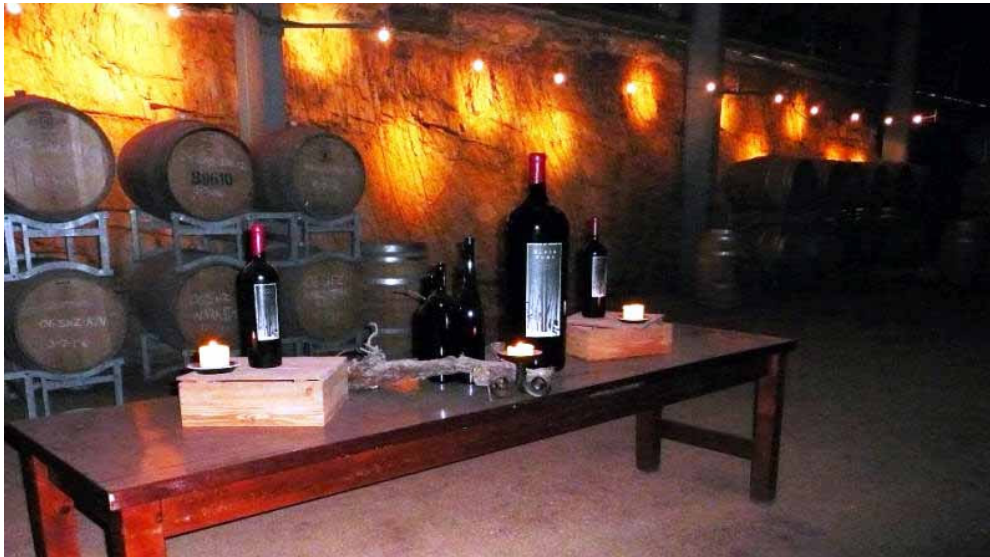
Like all wineries in the region, 2007 was a tough year. Volume was down approximately 50%, but this year things are looking better. They had a good dump of rain around Christmas which put a bit of water in the dam, just enough to get them through summer if they use it judiciously.

The last time I visited the winery in 2004 there was a thumping great big bloody hole at the back of the winery that had been scooped out of the side of a hill. It looked like they had moved half a mountain to make this hole. At that time, a merger had been proposed that would combine Warrenmang with the 800 acre Landsborough property, GlenKara Estate. A Melbourne consortium had intended buying both businesses and then floating the combined project. It was meant to be signed sealed and delivered by the first of February. In a good news, bad news situation, the 2004 vintage was a record harvest for both GlenKara and Warrenmang. Both organisations were busy with harvest and they didn't have a chance to finalise the deal. Then they hit a new financial year and because some of the details changed, a new prospectus had to be issued. For 12 months, every time they put the champagne on ice in anticipation of a celebration, something else would go wrong. Finally, due to the consortium's inability to conclude the purchase of Warrenmang, instead of the deal being floated, it sank. Luigi and Athalie Bazzani still own the property and are actively involved in the day-to-day running of the operation.

Big holes don't go away of their own accord and Warrenmang's sat there until the middle of 2006 when construction started on a new barrel shed. The journey to the barrel shed was an interesting one. We rattled our way back down the track until we hit the bitumen; drove past the restaurant and down to the cellar door. At the back of the cellar door behind the counter there is a tunnel with barrels stacked up on the left-hand side. I am sure a Harlem Globe Trotter could walk down this tunnel, provided they did it on their knees and made sure they bent their heads too. The tunnel does have atmosphere (otherwise it would be difficult to

breathe) and engenders a feeling of being in a winery. The end of the tunnel leads into the winery and once you turn left you are in the new shed.

This is a barrel shed with a difference. It has the most amazing atmosphere. When we walked



in it was lit by candles. I was most relieved to hear that this was not the proposed venue for our dinner. Having a candlelit dinner in a secluded place with these two guys would get tongues wagging. Absolutely! Part of the room's charm comes from the bare earth floor. I asked Dave why they hadn't sealed it. He said, "\$70,000 worth of concrete might have had something to do with it." They have started using the room for wedding functions and apparently it has been very successful. They roll out red carpets all over the place to increase the atmospherics. It also stops the bride's high heels sinking four inches into the earth and then going 'splat' onto their face. Spitting out all that earth would also mess up their lipstick.

At their current production rates they feel it is probably not necessary to seal the floor, but if they take the next step, they will have to examine the option again.

By this stage, we all had a good appetite so we headed up to the restaurant for dinner. The hors d'oeuvres were amazing. The first item was a game consommé with confit duck. The second item was a Moreton Bay bug nori roll. The only way to describe the consommé is to say it was bliss; sheer bliss. It was subtle yet intense and had a hint of star anise. When I said that it reminded me of a great Pinot, for some strange reason the other two laughed. The nori roll was very different and had an abundance of both garlic and ginger. To quote Brian, a fellow not exactly known for his verbosity, "Yum!" It was a beautiful combination of flavours.

The first wine opened was a **Primo 1996 Joseph Moda** that was corked. I know it is not a representative sample, but three out of the last ten bottles of Moda that I have had from the 96 and 97 vintages have been corked. Not happy Jan!

The second bottle opened was a **Houghton 1999 Gladstone Shiraz** which was Brian's contribution. I was glad Brian had brought this wine as we split a six pack and I wanted to see how it was progressing. The bouquet is lifted and bright showing tobacco and pepper. When the wine was released it was showed lots of oak but the fruit has now to digested it. The wine has softened beautifully but there is still a skip full of silky tannin, so it has a long future. The fruit is youthful and finishes dry and clean with lovely persistence. The flavour profile is black, but it's not that overripe black profile; there's loads of pepper and dark fruits.

The warm bread rolls were home-made, covered with poppy seed and the rosemary inside was a novel twist. They hit the mark.

The last time I ate at Warrenmang it was a boiling hot summer day. When I arrived at the restaurant it was stinking hot inside. The open windows were about as effective at cooling down the room as bicycle brakes on a 747. If you ordered a bottle of red from their wine list, OH&S would have dictated the waiters wear asbestos gloves to prevent burns when serving it. Drinking hot wine is about as pleasant as a visit to the proctologist. It's not something a normal person does for pleasure, so the place received a bollocking in that Tour Diary. It seems these name and shame tactics work. Dave had a great deal of pleasure in telling us that since my last visit, a new air-conditioning system has been installed. The ambient temperature in the restaurant was perfect.



We had left the starters up to the chef so we had no idea what was coming. When it arrived, it's just as well we already had eaten the hors d'oeuvres otherwise Brian would have been drooling. Simply put, the dish was a work of art, and I don't mean Jackson Pollock. Three individual dishes were presented. The first was a steamed oyster topped with Red Nahm Jim and crisp shallots. When I popped the oyster into my mouth, the flavours literally exploded across the palate. It was like a rocket and the Catherine wheel going off on your palate at once. Awesome! The seared scallops were served on a micro Caesar like salad that had been dressed with a Thai style dressing. The scallop was also special. It had a delightful combination and balance of flavours including sweet, a hint of chilli, salt, and unusually, pepper. The lobster was served on a slice of fig and a base of pork. The flavours in the lobster dish were

complimentary and were in perfect harmony but it was the combination of textures that was the stand out. The lobster was firm, the fig soft, and the pork crunchy and chewy. Stunning! The chef has had a significant amount of Thai culinary training, and Dave is a huge fan of Thai food and Thailand. I had to sit there bored out of my brain while Brian and Dave, two Thai wannabees, gasbagged on interminably and swapped reminiscences of Koh Samui and other exotic locations. Why couldn't they talk about Pat Pong or somewhere else interesting?

The next bottle of wine opened was a **Hardy 1994 Thomas Hardy Cabernet Sauvignon**. When this wine was first released I adored it. Unfortunately the next couple of times I tried it I was not impressed. It hadn't just crawled into a hole; it had buried itself in a depression so deeply that I thought it was either comatose and never likely to come out of it, or dead.



Drinking it was dead boring, so I sold all but two bottles which I buried in the cellar. They were exhumed in a recent stock take and I decided to take one on this trip, figuring that if it was a skeleton of its former self, Brian could drink it at the wake, whilst I praised myself for not drinking much alcohol. ([Brian's comment](#): That explains a lot. I'll remember that when picking wines for the next trip.) The bouquet showed bright, lifted fruit which is driving the wine. The tannins have softened and integrated beautifully. As the tannins have started to drop out the wine has thrown a huge crust, it's gone from being a huge wine to being almost medium-weight. Blueberry and cigar box flavours dominate the palate, and as it opened up, some green bean characters emerged.

For the main course I had rose wine crisp duck, pickled cherry, caramel gaa laon lombok, spring onions and garlic chips. It was served with a side order of hand-cut, twice cooked chips. As Jamie Oliver would say, the full-flavoured duck was posh. The cherry sauce was sublime. The authentic Thai salad that accompanied it had a wonderful combination of flavours. The twice cooked chips were unsurpassed, sheer perfection and just typing this up, is making my mouth water, as I remember the taste of this food. We tried one of the other house signature dishes, mash with truffle oil and garlic. When I tasted it, I went, "Waaaahoo - it is this good or what? God help anybody that gets near me tomorrow with the amount of garlic in this dish!"

We also had a **Black Puma 2004 Shiraz** with the food. The full tasting note is located below.

After we finished our main courses, [David Jones](#) from Dalwhinnie sat down and joined us for coffee. He had been attending a local winemakers' dinner and meeting that had been held in a private room.

We had been only going for two days and you would either have to be completely stupid, or a politician, not to be able to work out the Victorian wine regions' latest strategy. And it's a good

one. Let's face it, brand Australia which sold sunshine in the bottle whilst offering great value, is no longer working as well as it once did. The impact on Australian wine sales from the reliance on high Parker points in the US market has had its day. A new strategy for Australian wine exporters was absolutely necessary and long overdue. The Victorian winemakers have embraced the new regional focus with gusto. However, where this gets interesting is not with the overseas strategy, it's with the local strategy. The Victorian winemakers are determined to drive this strategy faster and harder than Kimi Räikkönen in a Formula One Ferrari.



Many of the Victorian producers have targeted the Melbourne restaurant market as their number one focus and drive. That makes so much sense it is surprising that there has not been an orchestrated effort like it before. Melbournians will support anything Victorian. Look at that stupid game they call football. If they will buy that pathetic excuse for a game, there is no reason

they won't buy their states own wine. Get the Melbourne Sommeliers and restaurateurs on side and they have a real advantage in the market. Sensible! And Simple.

The Pyrenees winemakers were discussing the possibility of creating sub regional marketing push for the Moonambel area. The objective would be to differentiate themselves from the wineries at the Avoca end, stressing the different climatic conditions between the two sub regions, and the effect it has on the wines. According to David, he likes the idea because it will enable the sub regions to add more definition to their identity. David then went on to tell us that Decanter Magazine is going global. Apparently they sent a Technical Editor who was based in South Australia for six months and spent much of that time looking at the regional terroir of the Australian wine industry. The French have been selling this concept for centuries, and the Italians haven't been far behind; both have been very successful so there is no reason why we can't do it too.

Apparently there has been a lot of interest in Asia and the magazine is about to be translated into Mandarin. That could possibly have huge implications for the Australian wine industry in the long-term.

That was the end of a terrific day and a most enjoyable dinner. But it is not the end of this chapter by a long shot. We have the samples that were sent to me for review, as well as more virtual winery visits.

Dave from [Warrenmang](#) was kind enough to post selected samples to me so I could try them at home at my leisure. They have been included here.

Bazzani 2005 Shiraz Cabernet sells for \$156 by the case (\$13 a bottle) at cellar door and is sealed under screwcap. The bouquet shows spice, cigar box, blackberry, cedary characters and some oxidative handling. The wine is well-balanced with loads of everything. There is nothing subtle about this muscular-weight wine, but it works. The sweet and savoury nuances deliver plum, eucalyptus, coffee, chocolate, cloves and liquorice flavours that finish with good persistence and is cleaned up by the fresh acid. Well backed by powdery tannins, the



consistency is soft and the complexity is diverse. I cannot believe that this wine is only \$13 a bottle and it offers heaps of flavour for the dollars. Drink over the next five years, it is rated as Recommended with **** for value. They don't come better than this at this price.

Warrenmang 2005 Grand Pyrenees Cabernet Blend sells for \$35 at cellar door and is sealed under cork. The bouquet shows cedar, spice, mushroom, coffee, and menthol. It is fruit forward but well backed by powdery tannins. The sweet and spicy, juicy-fruit delivers blackcurrant, hints of pepper, sour cherry and mocha flavours that finish with good length. It's a muscular-weight, harmonious and has a pleasing flavour profile. A very enjoyable wine, it is approachable now but will soften and improve in the short term. Rated as Highly Recommended with *** for value, it should reach its peak drinking window between 2011 and 2015.

Warrenmang 2004 Estate Shiraz sells for \$60 and is sealed under cork. The bouquet shows sweet, juicy-fruit that is subtly perfumed with plum, chocolate, eucalyptus and menthol. An impeccably balanced wine that is locked tight with nothing out of place; its ample-weight with a supple consistency and maintains a harmonious complexity. The fine and tight tannins are perfectly matched to the pure fruit which delivers plum, cherry, eucalyptus, chocolate and hints of pepper, and together with the coffee oak, it finishes dry. It is sweet on the uptake with a savoury mid-palate and finish. It needs time to show its best and if you are going to drink it young give it a good decant, as once it opens up it becomes seamless. A classy wine, it is rated as Excellent with *** for value and should be in its peak drinking window between 2012 and 2019. This was my favourite wine of the line-up.

Black Puma 2004 Shiraz sells for \$80 at cellar door and is sealed under cork. (The wine was tasted twice, once in the restaurant and once at home. Separate tasting notes were made on both occasions but they were remarkably similar.) The bouquet is tight, pristine and shows a wine of obvious quality, oozing menthol and high-tone berry fruit, together with pepper, spicy and coffee oak. A wine of some class, it sits beautifully in the mouth and is perfectly supported by silky tannins. Black plum, cherry, liquorice, chocolate, and vanillin flavours are savoury and finish with good length. An almost seamless wine of ample-weight with a supple

consistency; it is a linear across the palate. It has all the components, which are impeccably balanced but tightly glued together now, and it needs time for them to relax and unwind. A fine wine, it is rated as Excellent with ** for value; it should reach its peak drinking window between 2012 and 2019.



All the wines were good and the Bazzani blend is the best value wine I have found for some time. When I tried it, I never believed it would be so inexpensive. You would be completely nuts if you don't buy cases of the stuff for everyday drinking. Three years ago they produced 1600 cases and now they are producing 10,000 cases a year and growing.

As far as the restaurant is concerned, there is no need to regurgitate a heap of superlatives. It could not be faulted and that's high praise from me. Service was professional and the food was some of the best we have had on any trip. If you find yourself in this remote part of the world, eat here; you won't be sorry.