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EXECUTIVE  LIVING**Burgundy wines get southern taste**

MAX ALLEN | THE AUSTRALIAN | SEPTEMBER 28, 2013 12:00AM

ONE of the first people I interviewed for a newspaper article, back in the early 1990s, was Nerida Abbott, a young oenology scientist exploring the secrets of shiraz at the Australian Wine Research Institute in Adelaide. Not long after that story, Nerida and winemaker partner Nigel Sneyd moved to Europe and established their own wine label, Abbotts, in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of southern France.

There were a lot of Australians crawling through the Languedoc back then, mostly "flying winemakers", producing cheap 'n' cheerful chardonnay and merlot in big co-op wineries for British supermarkets. Nerida and Nigel's business was different. For a start they weren't FIFOs; they were there full-time. And they concentrated on the region's old local grape varieties - syrah, grenache, carignan - from appellations such as Corbieres and Minervois, and turned them into distinctive local wines but with a fruit-forward, Australian accent.

Flash forward a couple of decades, and I'm sitting across the table from Laurent Delaunay, a dapper bespectacled Burgundian who bought the Abbotts wine business in 2005 after the founders went their separate ways.

"It was a Tuesday," says Laurent. "Nigel phoned me, said he was going through a difficult time and they want to sell the winery. I had become friends with Nerida and Nigel and I was very impressed by their work, and I felt it would have been a pity to see it go."

Laurent had arrived in the Languedoc about the same time as the Australians in the mid-90s, after selling his family winery in Burgundy. The southern region was going through a renaissance, he says, and a lot of his Burgundian friends were looking to make wines there.

When he bought the Abbotts' business and added his own name to it, Laurent spent three years refining the style. "The wines were a little too ... new world," he says. "A little too concentrated, too high in alcohol and oak. Our preference is for wines with fruit and elegance." But as a tribute to the previous owners, he kept their cloud-inspired names for the top, single-vineyard, old-vine wines: the Alto Stratus Carignan and Cumulo Nimbus Syrah (both about \$40).

As impressive as these reserve wines are, though, I am drawn to the three 2011 regional reds in the Abbotts & Delaunay range, which all sell for about \$25.

I love the solid, sturdy darkness of the Minervois, the funky, meaty earthiness of the Corbieres, and the lifted perfumed spice and wildness of the Cotes du Roussillon. They are local wines with a distinctive French accent.

"I like this part of France because it has potential," says Laurent. "In Burgundy, there is little I can do to make things better. All has been done: the best sites identified, the best techniques adopted.

"But in the Languedoc, if I think what I have achieved in the last 20 years I have been there, and then think about if I can do the same again in the next 20 years, that is exciting."