

# Sunday Life

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## HOW TO TALK WINE ...WITHOUT BEING A TOSSER

FROM GREEK GEEK  
TO SCREEN GODDESS

A BANKER'S  
LIFE OF CRIME

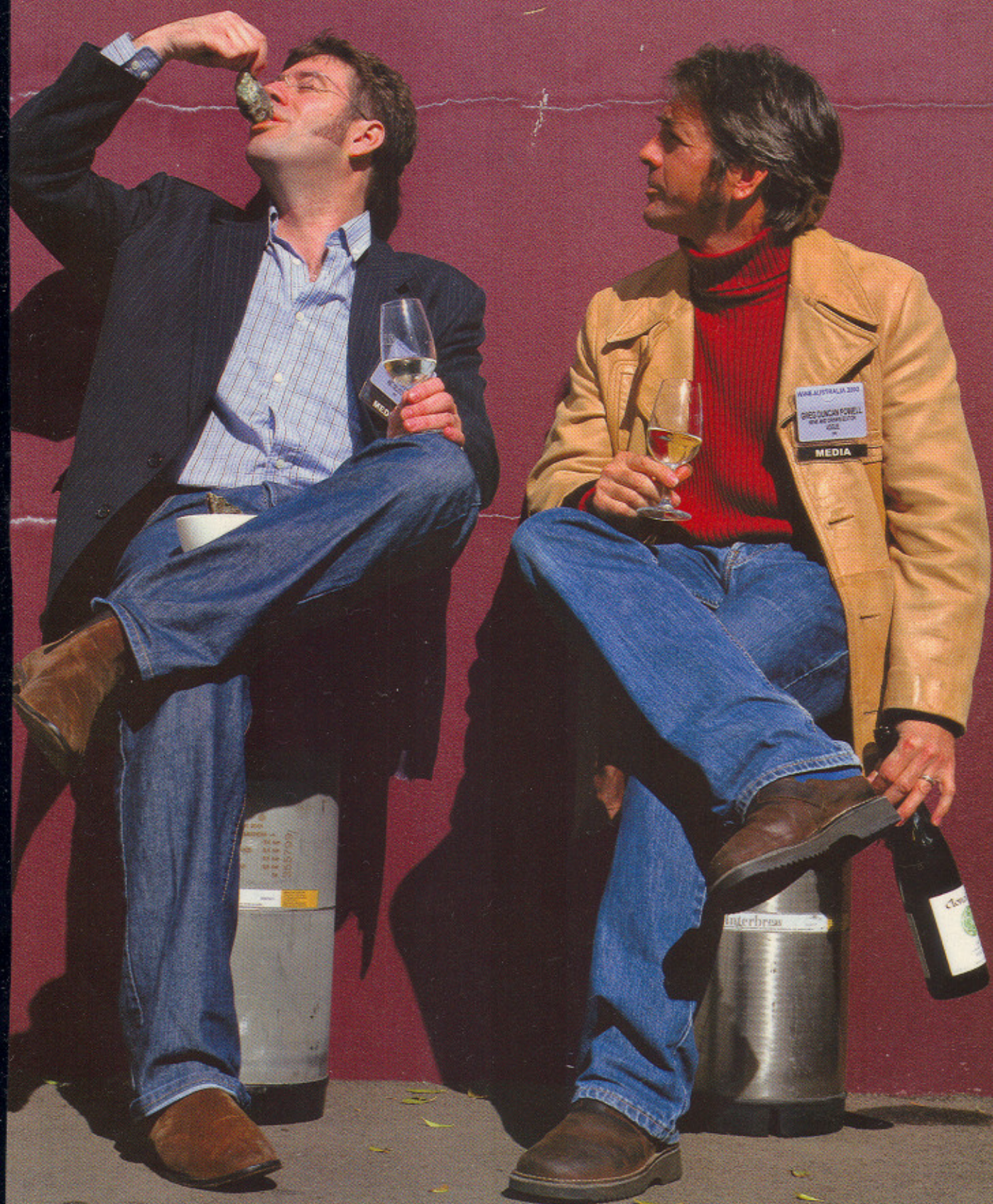
Ben Canaider and Greg Duncan Powell are the Roy and HG of the wine biz. Their no-nonsense guide forgets the lingo and just tells you what tastes good – and it has their peers spitting chardonnay. By **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH**. Photography by **PIP BLACKWOOD**

# GLASS OF THEIR OWN

**W**INE LISTS AT RESTAURANTS MAKE ME FEEL AS IF I've dressed up in my mother's clothes, my feet drowning in her size eight pumps. I search for something I've heard of. "A drop from the Margaret River would be good," I say (I'm told it's the new Barossa) or "Perhaps a riesling..." (it's the new chardonnay, you know). Decision made, I wait for the sommelier (French for waiter who knows about wine) to pour a splash. I sniff and taste. "Delish," I say as my friends roll their eyes. "It's corked," says my partner with his first sip. Oops! But then, what would I know? I'm just playing grown-ups.

I feel the fear when I go to meet award-winning wine writers Ben Canaider, 35, and Greg Duncan Powell, 40, at the Wine Australia 2002 trade show in Sydney's Fox Studios. The three huge halls are filled with men in chinos, chambray shirts and boat shoes (why do vintners always look like private schoolboys when they come to town?). These people know about oak and bouquet, where to put the accent on cuvée and where on their palate to find that passionfruit and melon flavour often mentioned on wine labels. I feel like the new girlfriend at the boyfriend's parents for dinner, terrified of using the wrong fork or, worse, asking for a serviette instead of a napkin. ▷

Ben Canaider (left) and Greg Duncan Powell see red at the Wine Australia trade show this year. "Wine has got alcohol in it; it should be fun," says Greg.



Ben Canaider doesn't look like a wine connoisseur, more like a former arts student now working at the ABC. Dressed in jeans and a tailored jacket, his rockabilly sideburns give him away. As co-author of *Drink Drank Drunk* – the annual no-bull wine guide first released last year (the second edition came out this week) – Ben has promised to demystify the wine world for me. “The book’s for those who prefer to swallow, not spit,” laughs Ben, as we weave through the crowd in search of Greg.

“This would have to be the biggest gathering of alcoholics in the southern hemisphere,” he says with glee. Pointing at the midriff-baring, body-pierced fillies with mullet-haired boyfriends, he declares, “Don’t you just love the new wine consumer? Wine has become a mega global lifestyle trend. It’s the new Contiki tour – everyone’s favourite demographic, 18 to 35, and potentially just as appalling.” Ben and Greg’s lifetime goal is to increase Australia’s wine consumption twofold and they applaud the youth crossing over from coloured alcoholic soda and beers to grape-inspired tipplers.

**“The way they’ve matched the crisp, fine and piquant flavours from their Tasmanian vineyard sites with the soft, creamy cuvees of other locales has resulted in a structured wine with zesty, autolysed, nutty fruit characters, hasn’t it? If any dinner dates are impressed by this sort of bullshit, drop them.”**

– Ben and Greg on cutting through the wine speak  
(*Drink Drank Drunk* 2003, page 116)

“We love alcohol in any form,” says Greg when we finally meet outside the McWilliams stand. While Ben’s an ABC type, Greg’s more rock’n’roll. His vintage pigskin jacket and two-day growth scream bourbon, not burgundy. Both have obscure degrees in history – Ben in French and Roman, Greg in medieval. While at the University of Melbourne, Ben ran a wine club. “The student union wouldn’t give us money for a drinking club, only for a car rally club, so we took the money and spent it on imported wine,” he recalls. After uni, and a brief stint working as a roof tiler, Ben began writing romance novels for Mills & Boon and had two books published. He then decided to combine his love of writing and drinking, and started submitting freelance wine reviews.

Greg also cultivated his love of drinking at university. After graduation, he soon realised a history degree wasn’t going to hoist him up the corporate ladder. Already addicted to writing (his thesis was on marriage in 12th-century France), he submitted a wine



## HOW TO SPOT A WINE TOSSER

1. They swirl the wine around in their glass incessantly.
2. They smell everything in an exaggerated way.
3. They are incapable of discussion outside of the wine-centric.
4. They know everything about cooking, too.
5. They become maudlin quickly.



The battle to not become a wine bore is constant, say Ben and Greg.

piece to *Follow Me* magazine in 1986, and was quickly employed as staff wine writer. He currently contributes to *Vogue Entertaining and Travel*; Ben writes a wine column for *The Age* and *Delicious* magazine. While Ben is based in Melbourne, Greg lives at Bawley Point, on the NSW south coast, where he makes his own hobby wine for friends-only consumption. “It’s very exclusive as it’s made so rarely due to the wallabies feasting on the grapes.”

They bounce off each other like Roy and HG, interjecting with their wine-world parody.

“We were at an industry function in Adelaide [in 1999] when we first met,” says Greg. “We sat next to each other at the dinner.” Ben interjects: “We both found the waitress’s hairdo pretty interesting. I felt like I’d known Greg forever.”

“We just agreed that most wine guides are really bad and no-one reads them,” continues Greg. “It [the function] was pretty boring so we started fantasising about chapters and how we’d do it.”

“Most wine guides are pox,” contributes Ben. “So, after we’d drunk a fair bit, we decided to do our own one.” They quickly found a literary agent and went straight to publisher Random House, which loved the idea of a wine book that described plonk in non-elitist terms.

Wandering the aisles and stands of Wine Australia, Ben and

**“Boot polish, dead ants, cleanly polished RMs walking through an ant heap ... that’s what this wine smells like.”**

– The boys on Baileys Shiraz 1999 (*Drink Drank Drunk*, page 47)

**“It’s not the product of an all-white tiled bathroom; it tastes more like it’s from the back shed. Anal retentives should look elsewhere.”**

– Annie’s Lane Shiraz 2000 (*Drink Drank Drunk*, page 133)

## HOW TO BUY A DECENT BOTTLE OF WINE FOR UNDER \$20

- Buy red.
- Go for full-tilt, hardcore regions, such as the Clare Valley or Barossa (SA); Hunter Valley (NSW) or Rutherglen (Vic) – you'll get a bang for your buck that way.
- Always choose the daggy label over the poncy one.
- Visit small fine-wine stores and talk to the people behind the counter about your needs.
- Drink it that night, or at lunch.
- Buy a winery's second label – that's the one they sell under another name for less money.



Greg are greeted like celebrities by those in the know. McWilliams, Evans and Hardy family members all clamber to touch them, offering wine and oysters, and I'm dragged along for the ride. Not that I'm complaining: it's not every day you have molluscs and champagne for breakfast. They handle it with grace and a humorous aside after the greeter has moved on. Rather than putting the winemakers offside, their anti-establishment stance has endeared them to some of the "old goats", as they put it.

The same can't be said, however, for some veteran wine writers, who asked not to be named. A quick ring around produced a few less-than-flattering responses. One described the guide as "tasteless" and "undergraduate"; another said bluntly, "It's a load of crap." But direct competitor Max Allen, author of last year's wine guide *Sniff Swirl & Slurp*, disagrees. "Ben has certainly got a few backs up ... because the industry takes itself too seriously and needs a bit of a prod," says Allen. "I think their book's tone is really good; it's conversational, colourful and more about putting wine in a social context."

Margaret Lehmann, director of Peter Lehmann Wines, concurs: "I think it's a very refreshing, honest style. They don't just choose esoteric little numbers; they're looking at it from a consumer's viewpoint." Says winemaker Charlie Melton, of Charles Melton Wines, "They put wine in the exact context it needs to be kept in – not so bloody serious."

The reason for this, of course, is Ben and Greg don't take wine seriously. "It's got alcohol in it; it should be fun," says Greg, who sits through numerous wine tastings each week and can spot a wine tosser at 20 paces. "I think because the English started wine tasting and writing about wine, their attitude was to make it boring and pompous."

"Wine people are boring, but [it's] because they use jargon," says Ben, the man who got drunk when accepting his Vittoria Australian Food Writers Award last year and told the room they were up themselves in his acceptance speech. (He says now, "I'm not proud of it.")

"A winemaker's personality comes through his wine," continues Ben. "Some wines have no character or personality whatsoever. You can buy a Lindemans Bin 40 Merlot with very little personality. It's good; not a bad wine and technically spot-on, but it's a robot. At \$8 a bottle it ships like Coca-Cola." ▸

“Lehmann is one of those blokes who’s fast becoming extinct in the Australian wine industry. Gruff and laconic, he swears, smokes fags, and thinks the Barossa is the best wine region and everywhere else in the world is crap.”

– Ben and Greg on Australian winemaker Peter Lehmann  
(*Drink Drank Drunk*, page 56)

As you’d expect, Greg and Ben’s taste-testing methods are far from conventional. More than 2,000 Australian (and a handful of overseas) wines are “drunk” and whittled down to 150 basics. These are then put into various categories, including “weekday”, “survival”, “establishment” and “unpronounceable”.

“Wine is like the weather,” explains Greg. “It’s an inexact science; we can’t predict it 100 per cent. That’s why wine and weather are so fascinating. Let’s just not be so anal about it all.” Instead of the usual procedure of lining up hundreds of bottles in front of a judging panel who sniff and spit, Ben and Greg drank them with food, friends, lovers and family over many months.

“Despite all the pretence that ‘wine evaluation’ is a science, it’s so subjective,” says Greg. “Lots of wine commentary is based on perception, not reality,” adds Ben. “One small winemaker made some grouse wines, but one really shit merlot. Some critics loved it. We didn’t. We put it on our ‘bench of shame’ after one *Drink Drank Drunk* tasting session. I asked the winemaker what went wrong, and he responded, ‘I’m not sure – everything, I think.’ We like him because he’s frank.”

“Stick to what you like,” advises Greg. “If you like chardonnay, don’t feel bad just because there’s a backlash against chardonnay. Wine has to fit into your life; your life should never fit into wine.”

We’ve all met people with wine cellars, wine mag subscriptions and mixed-dozen boxes from the wine club. They pepper their conversations with “Grange”, decant their red cordial and order from the top end of the wine list, making everyone else pay. “There’s generally very little you can do when your friend becomes a wine tosser,” advises Ben. “Just sit back, enjoy some of the la-de-da grog they buy, and wait for them to hoist themselves with their own petard.”

Being in the industry, you’d think they were in danger of becoming wine tossers themselves.

“Yes, it’s a constant battle,” admits Greg. “Invariably the best cure is to attend some sort of wine tasting and re-acquaint oneself with those afflicted. The worst is wine tossers and foodies together. Wine and food marriages of this type always

## PHRASES NOT TO USE WHEN REFERRING TO WINE

Any of these comments will reveal to the wine tosser that you are a dumb plonker

1. Interesting...
2. Yummy!
3. Oh, I like that!
4. Where’s Burgundy?
5. I love the way the wine makes me feel.
6. This won’t make me fat, will it?



## EIGHT AFFORDABLE WINES TO IMPRESS YOUR FRIENDS

### WHITE

**Penfolds Koonunga Hill 2001**

**Chardonnay, \$15** “Hunt it out in discount stores for \$11.”

**Primo Estate Colombard La**

**Biondina 2002, \$14** “No pretension and no need for wine-wanking nonsense.”

**De Bortoli Windy Peak Chardonnay 2001,**

**\$12** “Obviously been to finishing school, but it’s no ponce on the palate.”

### RED

**Stonehaven Stepping Stone Cabernet Sauvignon**

**2000, \$13** “Could be double this price and still get away with it.”

**Bleasdale Malbec 2000, \$14** “Be untrendy, drink malbec.”

**Plantagenet Omrah Shiraz 2000, \$19** “This wine really hangs around, but in the nicest possible way.”

**Wirra Wirra Scrubby Rise Red 2001, \$14** “Not just a fling; could be the real thing.”

### FORTIFIED

**Hidlago La Gitana Manzanilla Sherry 375ml, \$11**

“It rocks with tapas – otherwise known as ‘dead things on toast’.”



end with someone asleep in their soup. It’s hard to say who it will be; it depends on the tossers involved.”

Greg has to return home early to his new bride and fellow band member Siobhan O’Brien (he plays guitar in a group called The Scribblers; occasionally Ben joins them on vocals). Ben insists he’s single “for the sake of his target demographic and core market values”, although I suspect he’s having me on.

As a finale, he takes me on a tour of the Riedel stand. At first I’m confused as to why glassware would feature at a wine show until I’m swiftly corrected. “It’s ‘stemware,’” laughs Ben. “I am not prepared to continue a conversation with anyone who does not know the difference.” For \$60 a wineglass, you can have the luxury of drinking from an angle-designed Riedel stem, which will allow the chardonnay or merlot to hit the exact tastebuds it was made for. For \$5 a glass, you’ll be served in old-school tumblers at my house.

“What happens if I drink shiraz out of a chardonnay glass? Will it explode?”

– Ben and Greg on stemware (*Drink Drank Drunk*, page 17)

At the end of my tour, I’m well tanked up and equipped with my wine-tosser radar, which I intend to try out with friends that night. I leave Ben to his adoring fans, who continue slathering him with their wine wares in the hope he’ll write about it. But don’t expect any crisp, fruity words from these men. It’s back to basics. They drink to get drunk, or is that drank? □

*Drink Drank Drunk 2003 Edition by Ben Canaider and Greg Duncan Powell is published by Random House, \$24.95.*