

Barossa is smokin' Backing off the oak has lifted Octavius.

"The day started with a bacon sandwich - no ordinary bacon sandwich though. It was stuffed with Schulz's superior smoked version of this favourite brekky smallgood. Schulz Butchers in Angaston in the Barossa Valley is nigh on legendary and its bacon is as sought after as many of the region's shirazes.

It put me in the mood for the Octavius tasting. This was one of the two reasons we were in the Barossa. Not to buy bacon, but to taste a decade and more's worth of Yalumba's flagship shiraz, Octavius - sometimes dubbed Oak-tavius because of the extended period of time it has spent in smoky, toasty wood barrels over the years.

The first Octavius, the 1988, was not a Barossa shiraz, however, but was founded on a cabernet sauvignon (88 per cent) from Coonawarra. It spent a whopping three years in American oak octaves (90 litre casks) crafted at Yalumba's cooperage.

Yalumba is the only winery in Australia to make oak barrels on site and its four full-time coopers supply the winery with a quarter of its new oak needs. Oak for the octaves is aged for weight years and Yalumba has half a million dollars' worth of timber air-maturing in its yards.

Yalumba's director of winemaking, Brian Walsh, told us the 1988 Octavius wines all had "a particular character" because of the octaves. "We did think that it gave us something different that was worth building on."

The next release, the 1990, was made from Barossa shiraz (80 per cent) and cabernet



sauvignon. As Yalumba proprietor, Robert Hill-Smith, put it: "It seemed a bit odd to be making a wine from a vineyard so far away and so we decided to look at what was right under our nose."

All subsequent Octavius vintages have been made with fruit from low-yielding old vines in the Eden and Barossa valleys.

As we progressed through the wines it became apparent that the Octavius line-up pretty much mapped the fortunes and fashions of the Australian wine industry through the 1990s. At the beginning of the decade the Australian wine industry was burgeoning and a "no new wood, no good" policy prevailed - fashion funded by export success. But as the decade came to a close most winemakers came to their senses and backed off on the timber.

Having said that, the vintage's characteristics - its strengths and its weaknesses - were apparent in practically all the wines, but with the 1996 (an excellent season in the Barossa) the fruit was at last starting to come to the fore as the new oak component was backed off to just 70 per

cent (the balance being 1 and 2-year-old) and had 26 months barrel maturation.

By the time of the 1999 vintage, another excellent one for shiraz in the Barossa, this had been further reduced to 22 months in 70 per cent new, with the balance in two-year-old. This wine is, in my view, the best Octavius to be released to date (see What to Drink).

Kevin Glastonbury, Yalumba's chief red winemaker since 1999, has initiated further oak regime changes since his arrival. This has seen a further reduction in the amount of new wood used (50 to 60 per cent) and time spent maturing (18 to 22 months). Some of the wine is also being matured in hogsheads, too (300 litre barrels).

"We're now using better American oak," Glastonbury says. "And these days I'm not hamstrung stylistically in using only octaves, so we're now using hogsheads, which gives us a wide range of blending options, ensuring a better wine down the track," says Glastonbury. These barrels are also made in the Yalumba cooperage.

The last three vintages of Octavius we tasted, the latest 2000 release, as well as the yet-to-come 2001 and 2002, did indeed show much more restrained oak. While it's a pity many of the earlier vintages have been overwhelmed by it, it is good to see more reasoning - as well as seasoning - going into these future releases. The 1999 has a long and fruitful life ahead of it.

And without the weight of toasty wood that dogged its early years, Octavius is now more than ever smokin'."



EXTRAVAGANT BUY Yalumba The Octavius Shiraz 1999 (Barossa)

95/100 "Super-deep and coal dusty smelling, with chocolate panforte, burnt black berry bits and roast meat. Attacks with a big thud too, and builds dry chewy tannins. The fruit is dark and liqueurous and in the finish there's molasses, soy, and sea salt. This is a blinder of a Barossa shiraz. The 2000 has just been released but this is still out there."

