

Their market share is small but their power is strong. Peter Bourne finds out if wine clubs are worth joining.



2006 John Loxton Regional Selection Currency Creek Shiraz Viognier – Currency Creek, SA, \$14.49

This is one of Cellarmasters' house brands. The wine has an apricot blossom perfume lift and a soft, smooth palate filled with cherry and plum flavours. Try it with chicken cacciatore.



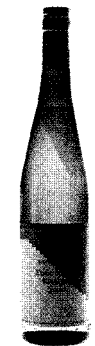
2006 The Wine Society Tasmanian Pinot Noir – Tasmania, \$19.99

This is absolutely delicious. From the warm 2006 vintage, it has oodles of soft, sweet aromas. Ripe strawberries and red currants intermingle with hints of truffles and toasted panettone. Soft with red berry flavours. Excellent with a classic Peking duck.



2005 Hungerford Hill Tumbarumba Chardonnay – Tumbarumba, NSW, \$22.90

Offered through Wine Selectors, this chardonnay has aromas of ripe nectarine and fresh fig enlivened with hints of toffee and nougat. It's a wine with depth and length. Perfect with pan-fried blue-eye cod on a bed of lentils.



2006 BackVintage Eden Valley Riesling – Eden Valley, SA, \$10.99

Australian rieslings offer fantastic value. This example has lifted aromatics of white blossom and lemon sherbet. The palate is vibrant with fresh lively flavours and a soft, almost creamy texture. Match it with King George whiting fillets.



2005 Tamburlaine Orange Malbec – Orange, NSW, \$27

This malbec has an earthy bouquet of briar and sour cherries – and a dense, chewy palate. Mulberry and damson plum flavours intermingle with rustic hints of liquorice and beef stock. Enjoy it with aged cheddar and pickled onions.

Australia's first wine club, The Wine Society, was founded in 1946 and now has 55,000 members who are entitled to a range of benefits, including newsletters, wine courses and dinners. The society also runs a private wine showroom in Woolloomooloo and retail shops in Sydenham, Castle Cove and Melbourne.

Although wine clubs only account for about 10 per cent of all wine sold in Australia, they have a strong influence on the domestic market. Some, such as The Wine Society, select wines after tastings by a qualified panel. Others are pseudo retailers, merely simplifying the buying process.

Most people choose wine clubs for their convenience – after all, who wants to lug a case home? – but consumers need to be aware that mixed dozens sometimes contain the occasional "filler" (i.e. a wine of inferior quality). Choose a club that offers a return and refund system.

Australia's biggest merchant of home-delivered wines is Cellarmasters. Launched 25 years ago, it has perfected the art of direct wine marketing. Apart from its own clubs (Cellarmasters The Wine Cellar, W for Wine, Private Cellar), the company is involved in other joint ventures, including Qantas Wine Club and David Jones Wine Club.

In recent years, Cellarmasters has been challenged by Wine Selectors, a direct marketing operation that grew out of the Hunter Valley Wine Society. It has regional selections and innovative offers.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Hunter Valley's boutique, organic producer Tamburlaine, which rejected traditional retailing many years ago and instead focused on its cellar door sales and the formation of a now flourishing wine club. The cornerstone of the Tamburlaine wine club is a quarterly tasting pack. Other Hunter Valley-based wineries, such as Tower Estate, Rothbury Estate and Tyrrell's, have followed suit. Indeed, Tyrrell's has one of the strongest mailing lists in Australia, with no joining fee and free delivery.

A new arrival is the Union Bank Wine Club in Orange. It was formed 18 months ago and offers seasonal packages* for members, showcasing wines from Belgravia Vineyards, Orange and elsewhere.

The Vintage Cellars Wine Club, which is owned by the Coles Group, bridges the gap between mainstream retailers and boutique winery operations. Club membership incentives include discounts, hosted winemaker dinners and an ongoing frequent buyer reward program.

Wine-Ark has taken a more eccentric approach. It was founded as a wine storage operation but is now a serious player in the premium wine market due to its unique Cellarclub, which offers exclusive tastings and access to rare wines such as Cullen, Craggy Range and Wendouree.

Another niche operation is BackVintage Wines. International wine judge Nick Bulleid selects a small portfolio of classic regional wines, which are labelled under the BackVintage brand and offered as an individual case or as a mixed quarterly dozen.

Many wine clubs offer free delivery, which is something to look out for. Others add insurance and delivery, which can erode the attraction of buying from a club in the first place.

BackVintage Phone: 1300 789 640; www.backvintage.com.au

Cellarmasters Phone: 1800 500 260; www.cellarmasters.com.au

Tamburlaine Phone: 4998 7570; www.tamburlaine.com.au

Tyrrell's Phone: 9889 4450; www.tyrrells.com.au

Union Bank Phone: 6361 4441; www.unionbank.com.au

Vintage Cellars Phone: 1300 366 084; www.vintagecellars.com.au

Wine-Ark Phone: 1800 111 275; www.wine-ark.com.au

Wine Selectors Phone: 1300 303 307; www.wineselectors.com.au

The Wine Society Phone: 1300 723 723; www.winesociety.com.au

*Declaration: Peter Bourne selects the wines for this offer.

