

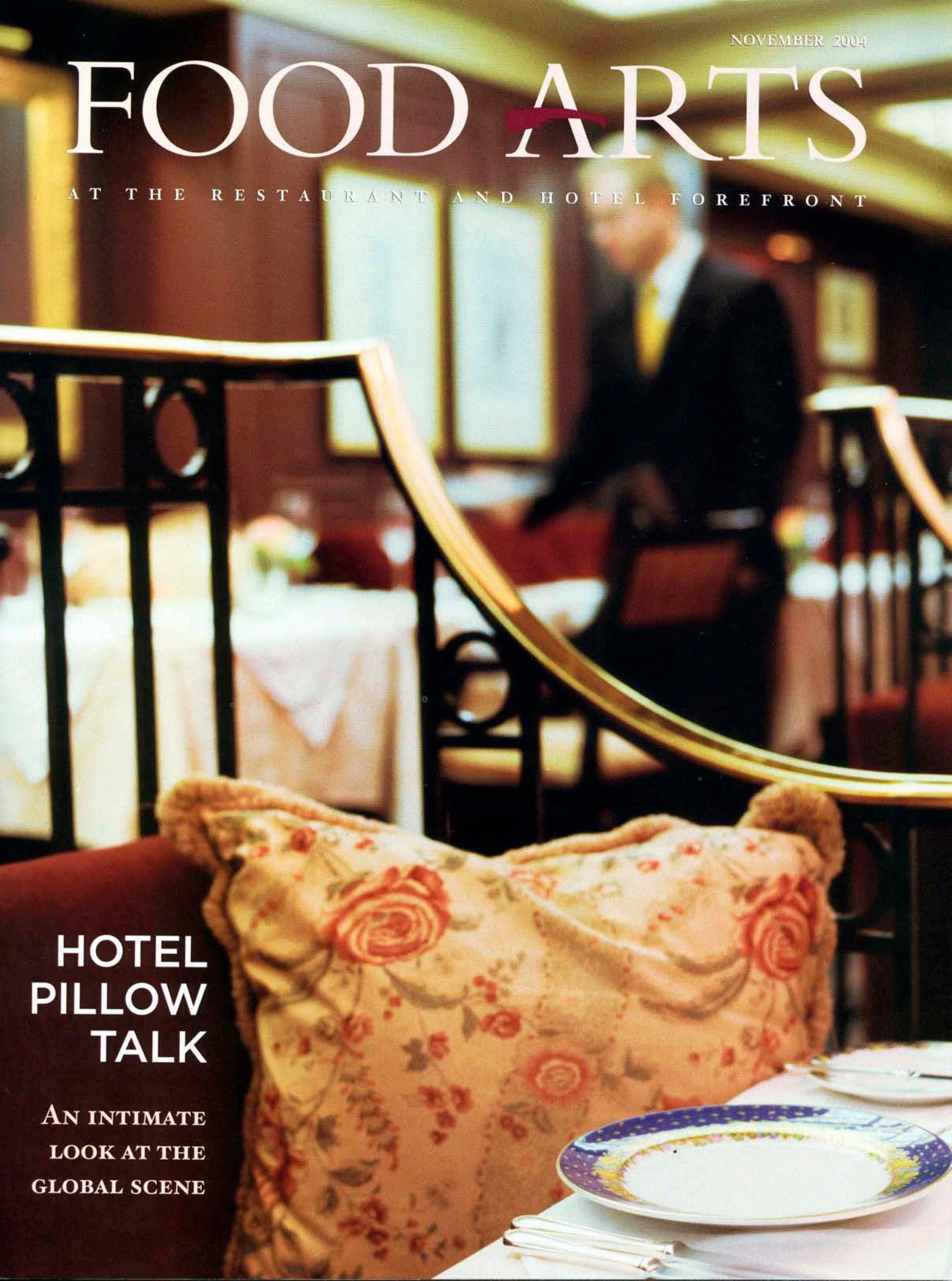
NOVEMBER 2004

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

HOTEL PILLOW TALK

AN INTIMATE
LOOK AT THE
GLOBAL SCENE



curious George

F&B NOT CONTENT WITH A MERE DESK'S-EYE VIEW, AN INFLUENTIAL F&B VICE PRESIDENT GOES LITERALLY TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH IN SEARCH OF GOOD VALUES AND FRESH IDEAS. TED GACHOT FOLLOWS CLOSE ON HIS HEELS AS HE SCOURS AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND.

George Vizer is a busy man. As vice president of food and beverage for **Hyatt Hotels & Resorts**, he has 122 properties to look after: 283 restaurants and coffee bars, 186 bars and lounges, room service, and banquet operations, together generating \$1.5 billion in annual revenue. Why should he sit in his Chicago office and wait for the right products to come to him—listening to the same spiels from sales reps and distributors, thumbing the same brochures as every other f&b executive—when he can go out and find them?

Last March, he and **Fred Tibbitts** did just that. For 10 days they buzzed harum-scarum across Australia and New Zealand. It wasn't the first time the duo had taken to the road together. In January 2003, Tibbitts, a global wine consultant who enjoys a somewhat larger-than-life reputation for his ability to establish mutually beneficial relationships between wineries and hotel chains the world over (see "World Wide Fred," *Food Arts*, September 1999, page 56),

Stop and taste the wine: George Vizer of Hyatt Hotels & Resorts takes time to enjoy a glass after an exhaustive search through the wine countries of Australia and New Zealand. Photo by Chris Lake.





Vizer made a stop at Penfolds (above), one of Australia's premium wineries. Photo by Andy Christodolo/Cephas. He also visited Yalumba (below), the oldest family-owned winery Down Under. Photo by Kevin Judd/Cephas.

sensed that Vizer was champing at the bit—and lured him along on a trip to Chile. Vizer returned from that endeavor not only with a brilliant new house pour (from **Veramonte**, producers of Primus, one of Chile's premier wines) but also in a better position to evaluate the Chilean products that would cross his threshold in the future and primed to take a more proactive approach to shopping.

This time, the itinerary—built on Vizer's hunches, Tibbitts' connections, and the efforts of the Australian Wine Export Council and New Zealand Trade & Enterprise—called essentially for four stops: the Barossa Valley in South Australia, Margaret River in Western Australia, Marlborough on the northern end of New Zealand's South Island, and Central Otago in the southern reaches of the same. Vizer would be meeting with people and tasting foods but primarily looking for wines. Each year, the hotels in his domain purchase some 300,000 cases, and just this year Australia became the largest exporter of wines to the United States, "eclipsing Italy and all others," Vizer notes. More specifically, "Australian Shiraz continues to have a unique appeal, New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc is produced in an untraditional style, and its Pinot Noir competes favorably with California and Oregon. But," as he mentioned on the flight into Adelaide, "I'm going with an open mind. Let's see what we find."

The first stop was **Ross Estate**, a small family-owned winery about an hour northwest of Adelaide, nestled among the Barossa Valley's sun-blanching hills. **Darius Ross**, an engineer and lighting manufacturer, had bought the place in 1993 as something to play around with during his retirement, and the six reds Vizer tasted were surprisingly good. Ross, while touring the property, admitted to a bit of serendipitous luck in landing **Rod Chapman** as winemaker. Chapman was so unassuming, topping off the tanks in shorts and boots, mottled with splotches of purple Shiraz, that it took a few moments for Vizer to register who he was—for 18 years a member of the team that put **Penfolds'** Grange-Hermitage on the map. Apparently, anxious to get his hands dirty working on small production again, he simply wandered up one day and asked for a job.

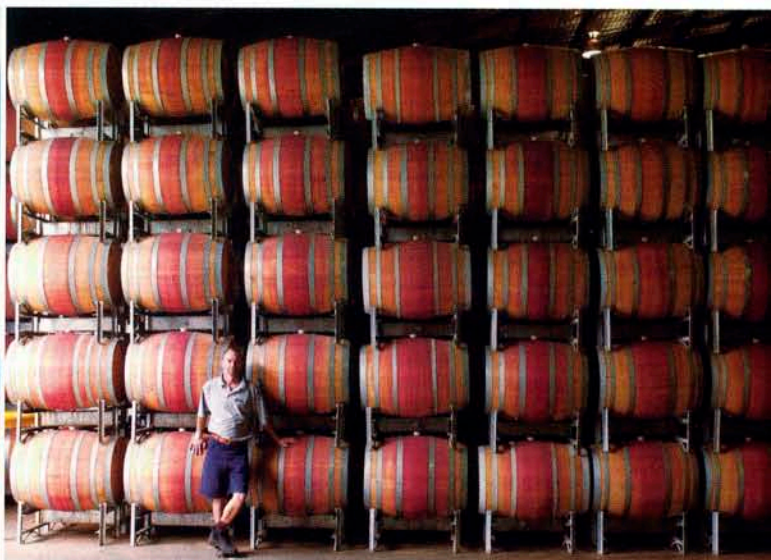
Excellent well-priced Shiraz from a winery still relatively

unknown in the United States, by a winemaker with the Grange on his résumé, was just the kind of thing Vizer was looking for. And, in fact, he was looking for a pretty specific sort of beast. Just before he left, he put the finishing touches on his wines-by-the-glass program. Now his sights were trained on a new house sparkling wine, wines that would fit the "core" list of 30 offerings that forms the foundation of each hotel's collection, and the "highly recommended" list of about 60 wines, which the properties use to supplement that core. The hotels are free to pepper their lists with the exotic and rarefied, but Vizer was after finds that would differentiate Hyatt when it comes to the wines people order most often. That meant tracking down exceptional examples of familiar varieties at various price points. Some of the more interesting specimens he flushed from the bush—the fantastically bone-dry Rieslings, rare in the United States, that are the standard Australian quaffing wine or the ethereal Semillons he tasted in abundance—he would have to let flutter by.

Usually he encountered both. As at **Yalumba**, Australia's oldest family-owned winery. Established in 1849, its compound of pleasant old buildings shaded by older trees even includes a fragrant cooperage where the winery still makes its own barrels. The winemaker, **Brian Walsh**, led a relaxed and intelligent tasting of beautifully crafted wines. Among them: a wild ferment Chardonnay made with yeasts naturally occurring in the vineyard, a couple of Shiraz-Viogniers blending the red varietal with just a touch of white, and a lovely Grenache from vines planted in 1899. Perhaps most outstanding was the Octavius, a dense, chocolaty Shiraz and the only wine in the world aged in such small (90 liter) barrels. Vizer, who at each tasting kept spare but definite notes in a bold hand, jotted "elegant" and "South Beach?" beside this one, fingering it as a potential "special" for Hyatt's new **Hotel Victor** on Miami's Ocean Drive, near the old Versace mansion.

The stop in the Barossa also afforded a few glimpses into the character of the local cuisine, never extraneous information for a





Left: At Wolf Blass, premium Shiraz, now bottled under screw cap, was the pick of the day. Photo by Adam Bruzzone. Right: At Vasse Felix, a tour of the wall-to-wall wooden barrels kept in check by winemaker Clive Otto makes the experience complete. Photo by Patrick Eager.

man who is continually opening or revamping restaurants. After a tasting at **Peter Lehmann Wines**, over homemade cheddar biscuits and a glass of sparkling Shiraz (a strangely appealing, dark, moussey apéritif that has caught on in Australia but seems unlikely to make Hyatt's short list), **Peter and Margaret Lehmann** told tales and offered a lively description of the local culinary tradition, which remains close to the land and tinged with Germanic flavor. Smoked meats, game, and sausage—often done with shavings from wine barrels—and salads of cucumber thinly sliced in vinaigrette, in variations whose merits are hotly debated.

Dusk was punctuated with the nice eerie warble of the kookaburra as the scene shifted back to the winery, where dinner was an exemplar of more contemporary organic Barossa cookery. In both Australia and New Zealand, some of the most arresting meals were this sort of simply presented fare drawn from the immediate environs. The habit of beginning with bread and olive oil (and sometimes *dukka*, a Middle Eastern spice mélange) is standard in both countries, where a strong baking tradition forms the substratum to the culinary culture. As are the sharing of a communal salad after the main course (and on the same plate) and a distinct preference for a cheese course (buoyed by expanding artisanal cheese industries), here accompanied by velvety dried fruits and followed by fig and plum tarts. The meal was rounded out by roasted grain-fed free-range chicken (from Saskia Beer's Barossa Chooks), beef (from Linkes, smokehouse specialists), organic green beans, and roasted potatoes—all served buffet style.

The lesson in Barossa cuisine continued the next morning at breakfast with **Maggie Beer** at the **Farm Shop** restaurant, which she established alongside her husband's pheasant farm. Fast becoming an international food celebrity (who, at the upcoming Barossa Slow food and wine festival, would be offering a seminar on "Offal, Offal, and More Offal"), Beer was on something of a verjus bender when Vizer arrived, serving up lamb with verjus sauce and hollandaise made with verjus over asparagus and poached eggs, while touting its value as an oil or butter replacement. She also described the burnt fig/honeycomb ice cream she'd dreamed up for

Qantas, while Vizer sampled beautifully firm fig, quince, blood plum, and apricot preserves, all from locally sourced fruit. The preserves immediately piqued his interest, but Beer explained that the machinery to package room service-sized jars involves a \$1 million investment she'd unfortunately not made.

But at every stop, winery visits remained the core of the journey. At **Orlando Wyndham**, for instance, Vizer inhaled the unearthly vapors emanating from a barrel faintly marked 1923 (a remnant from the days when the business was in fortifications) and tasted the 15 wines bottled under the Jacob's Creek label, the commercial appeal of which is clearly bolstered by chief winemaker **Philip Laffer's** deft hand in creating—with a sort of marksmanlike accuracy—a lineup with an incredibly consistent profile extending across the various varietals and blends. At **Wolf Blass**, whose massive 1.2 million-cases-a-year encampment might, from a distance, be mistaken for an oil refinery, Vizer learned that the company is somewhat dramatically transitioning from cork to screw cap by starting with its premium Platinum Label and Gold Label Shiraz. Wines under screw cap have found wide acceptance in Australia and New Zealand. Nevertheless, Vizer made clear that Hyatt is not ready to abandon "the romance of the cork" (as Tibbitts put it). And screw caps proved only a minor obstacle, since most wineries still bottle both ways.

Leaving the Barossa, the expedition detoured to Adelaide's **Lion Hotel** for a lunch whose agenda included the tasting of Australian lamb (the Lion's Suffolk rump with Lebanese eggplant, chile olives, and pomegranate dressing) and the sampling of pale, dark, filtered, sparkling, and vintage ales as well as extra and aged stouts from Australia's sole remaining family-owned brewery, **Cooper's**. It also afforded an opportunity to meet with key individuals in the export of South Australian foodstuffs. **Timothy Smith** of **Artisanal** led an informal roundtable during which Vizer learned, among other things, about competitively priced olive oils—which tend to be less buttery in taste and texture than European oils, with delicate citrus, herb, or nutty flavors—and in turn fielded questions about the prospects of increasing sales of goat meat in the States.



Left: The manor house at Yalumba winery is as elegant as the wine it produces. Photo by Adam Bruzzone. Right: Vizer was impressed by Australian lamb, which is served Down Under in both bare bones and complex ways, such as this slow roasted rack of lamb with miso and blue cheese. Photo by Takashi Morieda from *Tetsuya: Recipes from Australia's Most Acclaimed Chef*.

The lunch marked a sort of transition. As the expedition moved across the Great Victoria Desert, the seigneurial pace of its first jet-lagged days gave way to more of a breakneck, Mack Sennett urgency. The stop in Margaret River would be under 24 hours, but it would allow Vizer exposure to a wide assortment of high-quality wines.

Getting there meant stripping to a bare minimum of luggage (toothbrush and a change of clothes) and buzzing in, via a six-seat, single-engine plane of somewhat rickety vintage, the 300 kilometers (186 miles) from Perth, itself already considered the world's most isolated big city. **Palandri**, Margaret River's second-largest winery and a gracious host during Vizer's visit, sent along **Gabor Hernadi**. In moments, he and Vizer were chatting in Hungarian (complete coincidence or brilliant planning?). That same evening, Vizer had the interesting sensation, for a man of his vocation, of checking into an unmanned hotel—seemingly adrift like a ghost ship of lore, in the wilds of Australia's far west—the keys simply left in an envelope with a note.

A day of wall-to-wall wine tasting began the next morning at **Leeuwin Estate**, where Vizer was taken with the Art Series Chardonnay: "It's bold, with an onion skin color and complexity that reminds me of a **Grgich Hill** or **Cakebread** Chardonnay." At **Brookland Valley** he sat on a veranda, tasting crisp herbaceous whites and clean yet oomphy reds that caused words like "great" and "awesome" to be formed in the Vizer scrawl. At **Vasse Felix**, winemaker **Clive Otto** led a hasty sampling of half a dozen wines that would have far better been lingered over before Vizer was whisked upstairs, where winemakers from nine other wineries were already seated for a lunch/tasting. The chef, **Aaron Carr**, set out an excellent crispy skinned barramundi with Sichuan eggplant and pomelo/coconut salad, but 18 wines served up rapid-fire over lunch may not have been the best way to reach a hungry vice president of f&cb. Margaret River is the only stop where Vizer made a find at every winery he visited—yet nothing at lunch.

Among those finds were Shiraz from Vasse Felix, the region's oldest winery (founded in 1967), and **Palandri**, one of its youngest (2000).

Palandri's CEO, **Gordon Grant**, and chief winemaker, **Tony Carapetis**, were waiting on the tarmac when Vizer's plane landed the evening before. Over dinner, Grant uncorked a Chardonnay not yet exported to the United States, eager for Vizer's opinion about how it would fare with American tastes. And Carapetis, for comparison's sake, opened a bottle of **Moss Wood's** highly regarded Cabernet Sauvignon, from which **Palandri's** clones were taken, as well as one of his own. After lunch, however, there were just a few minutes for a tour and tasting before it was necessary to ferry Vizer back to the airstrip. He had tasted 70 wines, but his day was not yet done. Soon he was dining with **Franklin** and **Heather Tate** at **Fraser's** in Kings Park, overlooking the twinkling Perth skyline, sampling **Evans & Tate's** wines with **Chris Taylor's** specially paired menu.

For the final night in Australia, **Brad Camer** and **Andrew O'Brien** of **Penfolds/Southcorp** arranged a Shiraz tasting at **Guillaume at Bennelong** in the Sydney Opera House. It began with a raised glass of the fizzy stuff (Camer was a little disappointed that Vizer had already tried it) and culminated in the uncorking of, first, a 1986 Grange (a fabulous year) and then a 1978 (less so, but to show how the wine ages, evolving rich musty complexity and powerful mellowed fruit). The smart money ordered **Guillaume Brahm's** grain-fed tenderloin with tombé of field mushrooms, spinach, and shallot confit with Merlot sauce, while, through the opera house's arched windows, pale fireworks coincidentally blanched the sky.

Sauvignon Blanc was near the top of Vizer's shopping list and good reason for making Marlborough the first footfall in New Zealand. It was another stop of not quite 24 hours, wallpapered with winery visits and meetings. The main event, however, was a regional tasting of about 70 wines from 28 different producers, which got under way at 9 a.m. Marlborough is best known as the home of **Cloudy Bay** and the bold style of Sauvignon Blanc it made famous, but the tasting also included sparkling wines, Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, even a Montepulciano. Vizer, who has the exacting taste one expects from a person in his position but one also instinctively in tune with his clientele, threw himself into

it. After sipping through the sparkling wines, he rather quietly announced that he'd made his decision (a sip that meant the sale of 12,000 cases). He'd tried it in Chicago, and, after sampling it again in its native hemisphere, decided on Lindauer Special Reserve. "The crispness and elegance has great appeal and is heads and tails above the others in the price range we're targeting," he explained. After finishing up the whites, he paused to do an interview with New Zealand TV, which ran as the second story on the national news that evening. (In a nation with the population of Iowa, a man with Vizer's budget creates a wake.) He then made his way down the red side of the long table, diligently taking notes and culling those wines he wanted sent to Chicago for a second look.

Over lunch, where eight **Hunter's** wines were paired with local foods, Bill Floyd, of Floyd Marketing, described Marlborough, nestled among low green mountains a stone's throw from the unsullied sea, as being "like Puget Sound and Napa placed side by side." The chef at Hunter's, **Robert Van Deweers**, grilled hoki, a flaky white fish flash-frozen at sea, which Floyd touted as a replacement for overfished and overfarmed cod. There were steaks of tender, ultra-lean wapiti—an unintentional cross between introduced Rocky Mountain elk and wild red deer—served with pear/fig compote on a mash of ginger and the local kumara potato. And a nice blue borage/honey ice cream. Most interesting to Vizer, however, were the Greenshell mussels. Peculiar to New Zealand, and originally harvested to be used as an arthritis remedy, these large mussels (not quite twice the size of the blue/black variety) are farmed on ropes suspended in some of the world's most unpolluted waters, in an ecologically sustainable practice. He particularly liked the sous-vide option: "The hotels can offer them and be assured of their freshness."

The main reason for venturing to the final destination, Central Otago, was Pinot Noir. Surrounded by fairy-tale mountains tearing fleecy clouds, distinctive Pinots seem to spring from the craggy terrain like delicate alpine flowers. As in Marlborough, the visit centered around a regional tasting. Out of 30-some wines, including 20 Pinot Noirs, Vizer quickly isolated a handful with potential. But there were a few challenges: reflecting high demand within the New Zealand market, Central Pinots tend to be pricey. And a wine that seems reasonable at \$45 retail may appear overpriced when marked up for on-premise sale. Once the price hovers at about the \$100 mark, the wine must be exceptionally good. Some of the best Pinots are also exported in only very small quantities. The availability of Vizer's two favorites, Akarua and Mt. Difficulty, would work out to less than one case for each hotel.

When Vizer places a wine on his "highly recommended" list, it's a strong recommendation. He needs the wines to be there if the hotels choose them. (On average, those hotels—with lists running from the bare bones 30 at the **Hyatt Regency Louisville** to 1,800 at the **Park Hyatt Carmel, Highlands Inn**—order 20 of the suggested wines.) This, Tibbitts observes, is among the top reasons for Vizer to make such a long trek. "Some of the better wineries must allocate part or all of their production," he explains, "so it becomes very important for key volume buyers to establish a personal relationship with the winery decision makers to maximize their share of that allocation."

For his part, Vizer, who has been with Hyatt—still a family-owned business—for 24 years, is clearly interested in establishing working relationships with people he likes, trusts, and respects.

At **Peregrine**, owner **Greg Hay** was flexible on pricing and willing to promise sufficient quantities. And his Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir were standouts. (Offering good pricing to clients like Hyatt can make sense: its presence on the hotel's list buffs the winery's image, and every bottle sold on premise is said to generate the sale of five at retail.) One sensed the spark of a relationship.

The next day, he was on the trail early for a final series of winery visits: first to **Carrick**, then **Mt. Difficulty**, and finally **Felton Road**, which, while producing what is widely regarded as the cream of Central Pinot, is also making the noble and forward-looking move of gradually converting all its vineyards to organic cultivation.

And that was it. Vizer was to leave that afternoon, due back in Chicago for an important meeting. It had been, in many ways, a bewildering undertaking: in 10 days, he boarded as many flights and tasted nearly 400 wines, but despite the circles under his eyes, it was worth it. "From my perspective," Vizer explains, "the difference between visiting for an hour with a wine distributor and a visit to the winery is like night and day. To appreciate the environment where the wine is created and see the passion in their winemaking process, to sit with the winemaker or the owner and understand their winemaking philosophy and just who is actually *behind* the label, makes all the difference in the world."

By the time he left, he'd earmarked about 60 wines to go to Chicago for another tasting, then to be vetted to create a balanced list. The hardest part was still to come. ■

Vizer's Finds

Barossa Valley

Ross Estate Barossa Shiraz

Yalumba Chardonnay, Shiraz-Viognier, Grenache, and Shiraz

Margaret River

Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay

Brookland Valley Cabernet Merlot

Vasse Felix Shiraz

Palandri Shiraz

Evans & Tate Redbrook Cabernet

Marlborough

Whitehaven Sauvignon Blanc

Cloudy Bay Pinot Noir

Nautilus Pinot Noir

Lindauer Special Reserve Sparkling Chardonnay/Pinot Noir

Central Otago

Peregrine Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris

Felton Road Pinot Noir