



**N**EIL Prentice is a knock-about wine man who has spent 10 years becoming an overnight sensation.

Judging by the three wines he has out under his name, he is likely to become just that if he keeps up this kind of approach and standard.

A clued-up bloke is Neil. I have been bumping into him at all kinds of wine shows and tastings, and in various bars, for a decade, and he has always impressed with his wine knowledge, his palate and his opinions.

Down-to-earth and plain of phrase, Neil is nevertheless one of those people with a formidable palate memory and love of wine trivia. The kind who can remember which vintage of which small winery first benefited by the vineyard switching to Scott Henry trellising, or maybe which was the first to experiment with a blend of barrel ferment and stainless steel.

All of this has stemmed from nothing more than a sheer enthusiasm for wine. "I started as a barman," he said. "I was at Champagne Charlies when Iain Hewitson first started it up, and I was at the Lemon Tree before Iain opened up the Last Aussie Fishcaf with people like Russell Branton.

"I used to sit around listening to these two going on about this or that \$200 bottle of Domaine de la Romance-Conti and it occurred to me that maybe I ought to find out what sort of wine they thought was worth that sort of money. Well, I found out!"

But how did he become a barman? (You may also have run across Neil at the Lord Newry, the Dogs Bar, Tolarno and the George). "A progression of things, including a stint in the army at Duntroon, which I found wasn't for me but which they thought was, so they wouldn't let me go.

"Anyway, after I'd taken a car and gone AWOL, and was quite enjoying myself back in Melbourne, with my hair dyed blue, I was in this club one night when the military walked in and hauled me off.

"I spent a few weeks as their guest, doing intellectually stimulating things like digging holes and filling them in again. After which they decided I wasn't for them after all."

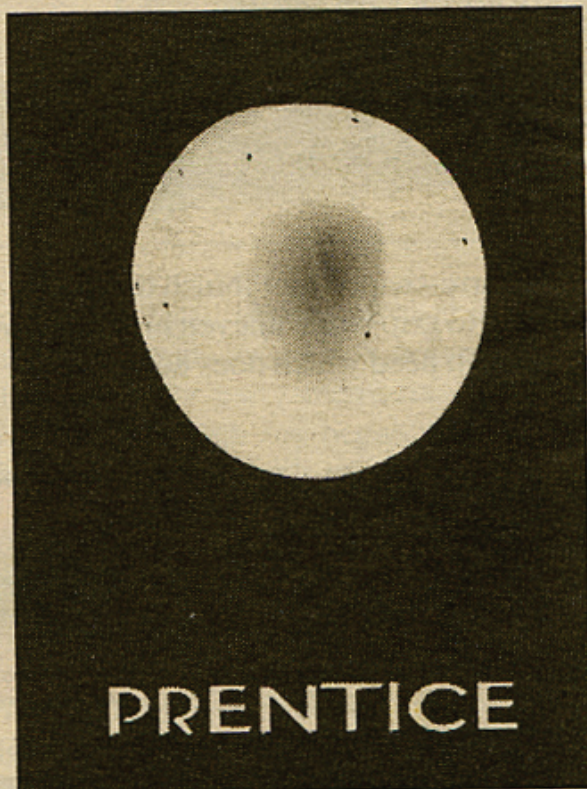
A man with a difference. Which brings us to the Prentice wines — different before you have even opened the bottle. The labels are stunning.

The 1995 chenin blanc has a vivid

yellow blob on a black background. That blob changes to vibrant red for what Neil calls the LeRoy's Blend of the suddenly-in-fashion mourvedre, grenache and shiraz.

Many a small winery struggling for impact has paid as much as \$5000 to have a label designed. A standard price for a ho-hum label is \$1000.

The Prentice labels were done by designer friend Clyde Terry and cost "several bottles". Each is in fact a photograph of a grape. They are



inspired. They suggest a light-hearted look at a serious subject. They are different. And there is the key word in the life of Neil Prentice: Different.

He created Prentice wines because those 10 years as a barman watching tens of thousands of people enjoy themselves gave him an invaluable insight into what people want when they want something "different".

Try these wines and see what I mean. The 1995 chenin blanc is a simply delicious, aromatic, crisp white at \$14. The 1994 LeRoy's Blend of Barossa Valley mourvedre and grenache, plus Mount Macedon shiraz, is a spicy-peppery, medium weight red most wine drinkers could enjoy at \$15.

And there is a comparatively daring bubbly because it is made from riesling, not the more fashionable chardonnay and pinot noir, that had one recent expert tasting panel guessing France, the US, New Zealand.

It is, in fact, from Macedon, costs \$19 and should probably be more. You will find them at places such as Richmond Hill Cellars, McCoppins, the George, Winebins and Philip Murphy.