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WINE TRAVELLER: NORTHERN TASMANIA + YARRA VALLEY RETREATS

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Some of our best boutique wines are winging their way to the US, thanks to Australia's Wine Angel, Michele Anderson

TEXT BY SALLY GUDGEON PHOTOGRAPHY BY BROOKE SLEZAK

MICHELE ANDERSON EXUDES SUCCESS. Using her stylish apartment in New York's Greenwich Village as her headquarters, Anderson has parlayed a love of wine and her home country into a successful import business, The Wine Angel.

Sponsored by her employer, Booz Allen Hamilton (BAH), Anderson moved from Sydney to the US in 1991 to do an MBA at Wharton, the University of Pennsylvania's business school. She spent the 1990s as a BAH management consultant, working with an eclectic mix of not-so-angelic clients, including Playboy Bunnies and gambling magnates. "I had my own vice practice," she laughs.

As Anderson explains, the switch from Booz to booze came about because she "wanted to put my own skin in the game, and channel my energy and ideas towards a business of my own instead of advising and growing other people's". Anderson arrived at wine importing as a business venture after jotting some ideas down about what was important to her. "I wanted to work with talented and interesting people, travel back to Australia a few times a year, tap into my sales, marketing and distribution experience and, most of all, work with a product I love," she says. It was an ambition realised with the establishment of The Wine Angel in December 2002.

Anderson's love of wine dates back to her days of studying law at the University of NSW, which she helped fund by working part-time at Sydney's The Regent (now the Four Seasons) restaurant. Here she learned a lot about wine and would often stand in for the regular sommelier. One of her favourite customers was an Italian businessman who would order a bottle of 1966 Grange. A second bottle would follow, of which he would only ever drink half, leaving the rest for Anderson. "It was the first wine I had ever tasted which just kept singing," she recalls.

The Wine Angel started to take shape when Anderson held a meeting with Peter Hollick, the owner of Tuck's Ridge Winery, which had been organised by a mutual friend. Further discussions ensued with Tuck's and contracts were signed.

The next step was to secure a distribution agreement for the north-east coast of the US. "It's a struggle to get the attention of distributors and retailers as there's already plenty of Australian product on the market," she admits. But after months of fruitless discussions with various companies, she discovered that John Magliocco, owner of top New York alcohol distributor Peerless, was also a Wharton alumni. Suddenly, a door opened. "I'd have struggled otherwise," she says. "I'll be forever grateful for that kick-start."

Throughout 2003, the first year of trading for The Wine Angel, Anderson shipped 1000 cases of Tuck's Ridge and its second label, Callanans Road. Anderson says she is aiming for 2000 cases this year and is extremely excited about these two labels. "Tuck's is a fantastic flagship from the Mornington Peninsula," she enthuses. She also says that wines from this region are easy to promote in New York because of the strong similarities between the Hamptons and the Mornington: "The Mornington is the weekend playground for Melburnians, as the Hamptons is for New Yorkers, with cool-climate, maritime vineyards running along the coastline."

Anderson is adding to The Wine Angel's roster this year with Sally's Paddock and its second label, Hundred Tree Hill, from the Pyrenees in central Victoria, along with Moorilla Estate from Tasmania. She plans to eventually expand her portfolio to include 10 Australian brands, "a flagship producer from every key region".

Recent figures show Australian wine sales are booming in the US, having overtaken French wines in volume (Australia now ranks second behind Italy). While some Australian exporters are concerned that the stronger Australian dollar will affect US sales, Anderson is optimistic. "The production costs in Australia will always be lower than over here," she states. Also, thanks to the marketing dollars spent by the four major wine companies – Beringer Blass, Orlando Wyndham, Southcorp and Hardys – "Brand Australia" is well established in the US. "Consumers have enjoyed the commercial brands and are ready to trade up," continues Anderson. "There's an increased demand for the finesse and elegance of the cool-climate styles. I want to show people there's more to Australia than warm-climate, 'kick-in-the-head' fruit bombs."

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Anderson sees the US as the ripest wine market in the world. "Though it's already the biggest market, there's plenty of room to grow, as wine consumption per capita is only one-third that of Australia and the UK," she says. "The Puritan influences portraying wine drinking as ungodly are gradually beginning to disappear." And how, one wonders, could it possibly be sinful if The Wine Angel recommends it?

The Wine Angel, phone +1 212 637 0330, visit www.wine-angel.com. !

