

CHARDONNAY SYMPOSIUM

Presented by

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We are living in a golden age for Australian wine. Yes, we are still in oversupply, meaning there is plenty of inexpensive wine around. And yes, we are still trying to woo back the British and American drinkers who fell out of love with our wines in the early 2000s. But thanks to a combination of older vines, better technical skills, a greater awareness of climate and a deeper understanding of the global wine market, we have entered what winemaker, Stephen Pannell from the McLaren Vale, calls the third wave of winemaking. Wave one came in the first half of the 20th century, when pioneering Australian winemakers such as Maurice O'Shea and Max Schubert returned from stints in Europe armed with the skills to make high-quality wines. O'Shea went on to found the Mount Pleasant vineyard, Schubert to create Grange Hermitage and at a time when Australian's drank far more fortified wine than table wine.

The second wave came in the late 20th century, when local winemakers developed a reputation for technically correct wines which sometimes lacked individuality. As we settle into the 21st century our best winemakers are far more interested in terroir. These third wave producers know that a sense of place is as important as grape variety. They also understand that certain grape varieties are more suited to some climates than others, hence the explosion of single vineyard wines over the last 15 years.

The French have always been extremely keen to extol the virtue of particular vineyard sites as being the product of a complex amalgam of, not just the soil and subsoil, but anything that might contribute to the "uniqueness" of that site, including the climate (rainfall, wind, day and night temperatures and hours of sun are all factors here), elevation, aspect and drainage, to name just a few. France's hierarchical appellation system revolves around this notion that certain "privileged" vineyards produce the best wines.

At the core of this very French philosophy is the notion that while you can grow and make chardonnay - the famous white grape of Burgundy - successfully all over the world, you can only make Meursault in one place, and that's Meursault. Indeed, it is considered Meursault first and foremost, and chardonnay second. (Line up a range of Meursault from a great producer such as Guy Roulot and you can clearly see the differences between the individual vineyards/terroirs in wines made using basically the same technique.)

Where does this leave Australia? Historically, Australia has placed more emphasis on winemaking and varieties than on the vineyard. This philosophy is still at the heart of Australia's largest producers, such as Accolade and Treasury who champion the concept of multi-regional blending to make consistently good-to-great wine.

Penfolds has always argued that Grange is a reflection of the best - mainly Barossa Shiraz - fruit at its disposal; not the product of some unique and individual vineyard site. Wine writers and the market-place obviously have no problem with this, as Grange has no equal in Australia in terms of prestige and historical importance.

One could argue that Grange has a regional identity, even if this is not quite the product of terroir as the French would have it.

As Peter Gago puts it, "If a wine can be improved by blending it, then that's what we will do." Southcorp's attitude is that, unlike the French, it has the ability to make both a Penfold's Grange and single vineyard wines such as Magill Shiraz (made every year) or the 1996 Kalimna Block 42 Cabernet - part of a series of one-off wines, made when vintage conditions demand it.

While Coonawarra's strip of terra rossa has historically been posited as an obvious example of terroir in Australia, the synergy between region and variety is at an all-time high. Adelaide Hills chardonnay and sauvignon blanc; Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula pinot noir; Barossa shiraz and grenache; Margaret River and Coonawarra cabernet sauvignon; and Clare, Eden Valley and Mount Barker Riesling to name just a few, are all just some of the varieties in Australia that have demonstrated this affinity with their locations.

Regions such as McLaren Vale, the Hunter Valley, the Barossa Valley and The Yarra Valley were all making wine in the nineteenth century, so it's remarkable to think that if it wasn't for two papers published in 1965 and 1966 by Dr John Gladstones – a lecturer in agronomy at the University of Western Australia – in the Journal of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science that Western Australia's Margaret River wine region would not be celebrating 50 years of grape growing next year.

And while Margaret River enjoys a worldwide reputation for both Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay it's important to note that Gladstone's hypothesis concluded that due to its well-drained, ironstone, gravel soils and equally importantly a similar maritime climate and rainfall to Bordeaux the region was an ideal place for growing Cabernet Sauvignon.

The original Margaret River plantings at Vasse Felix (1967) Moss Wood (1969) Cape Mentelle (1970) and Cullen (1971) all included Cabernet but not Chardonnay which wasn't on Gladstone's radar. Given the first (usually cited) commercially released chardonnay in Australia was made by Tyrrells in the Hunter Valley in 1971, cuttings were hard to come by and the varietal was still a relatively unknown proposition in Australia, let alone Western Australia when Leeuwin Estate (1975) and Cullen (1976) planted Chardonnay.

Leeuwin signalled early on that Chardonnay had potential, winning gold at the Sydney Wine Show with their 1980 Chardonnay while the 1981 Chardonnay was given Decanter's highest recommendation. Thirty-five years later and Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay is still widely regarded as a benchmark for Margaret River and Australian Chardonnay.

For most of the 1990s and 2000s Margaret River's reputation as the premier chardonnay region in Australia was unassailed. This has changed dramatically with the rise and rise of Chardonnay in other parts of Australia and most significantly in the Yarra Valley. How Margaret River has responded to the challenge has been fascinating to watch.

Two producers who haven't put a foot wrong in recent years are Xanadu and Voyager Estate, both a stone's throw away from Leeuwin. There are five wines in the Xanadu range starting from the well-priced (something the region hasn't always been noted for) Next of Kin Chardonnay, which consists of declassified estate fruit from Xanadu's vineyards in Walcliffe, fruit from Karridale (another 30 kilometres further south and considerably cooler) and Wilyabrup. This gets the same winemaking treatment as the more expensive estate single vineyard wines in that the wine is 100% barrel fermented using natural yeasts and the fruit is whole bunched pressed. And none of Goodall's Chardonnays go through malolactic fermentation.

Cliff Royle's Voyager Estate 2002 Chardonnay was one of the first Margaret River chardonnays that was picked earlier and avoided malolactic fermentation which had been the norm. The result was a wine that was far more restrained and that Royle says was influenced by conversations with east coast chardonnay gurus Dave Bicknell (from Oakridge) and Tom Carson (now at Yabby Lake) and by burgundies he had tasted from Roulot and Pierre Yves Colin Morey.

Royle left Voyager in 2009 and is now crafting equally good wines at Flametree where the SRS (Sub Regional Series) represents the best single wine he can make. So far they have all been from purchased fruit sourced in Walcliffe as 'I'm looking for lime and greener stonefruits and Wilyabrup is not in a flavour spectrum I'm looking for'. Royle no longer stirs the lees (battonage) and the wine is now being fermented and matured in 500 litre puncheons (as opposed to 228 litre barriques) in an effort to refine the style even further.

The newest kid on the block is Deep Woods where Julian Langworthy has been making superb Chardonnay and Cabernet since he left Knappstein in the Clare Valley to become chief winemaker in 2011. The key for Langworthy for making complex, ageworthy Wilyabrup Chardonnay is using Gin Gin clone as he can pick at 12 baume – 'if it's got flavour ripeness, we grab it.' Langworthy's 2013 Reserve Chardonnay, made from fruit purchased from two long term grower in central Wilyabrup is a beauty becoming the first Margaret River Chardonnay to win the James Halliday Chardonnay Challenge in 2014.

It is Vasse Felix though – whose reputation was built on Cabernet, that has made more strides with Chardonnay than any other producer over the last decade. Virginia Wilcock, who was Gourmet Traveller WINE's 2012 Australian Winemaker of the Year, joined Vasse Felix at the end of 2006. The key here apart from high solids and wild yeast fermentations is when to pick the fruit, which Wilcock describes as critical.

With its funky, struck match aromas to go with superb fruit concentration and a beautifully delineated and detailed palate, the 2013 Heytesbury is the epitome of modern Australian Chardonnay. Along with the best wines from the region, this clearly demonstrates what a number of wine writers both internationally and in Australia have been saying for some time, and that's Australia is producing the greatest chardonnay in the world outside Burgundy.

Indeed the continued rise and rise of Australian chardonnay is possibly the most exciting development in Australian wine over the last 10-15 years. It's hard to believe now that when I chose my first top 20 wines for my AFR Magazine column, I considered not including a chardonnay at all! And since 2012 I have included a wine of the year which has included two chardonnays – Giaconda 2010 and my wine of the year last year was Flametree SRS 2014.

As I've already mentioned, today's new breed of mod-Oz chardonnay is a world away from the rich, oaky styles that predominated in the 1980s and 1990s. The James Halliday Chardonnay challenge which I am chairing for three years starting last year has gone from 260 wineries (from 40 regions) in 2012 to 355 producers (from 50 regions) is emblematic of the improvement and interest in the variety. It is well on the way to becoming the most significant wine show devoted to a single varietal in the world.

In its first four years it has been won by wines from four different regions in four different states and by both large and small producers. From Yattarna (Tassie) in 2012, Seppelt (Drumborg) in 2013, Deep Woods (MR) in 2014 and the single vineyard Silkman Reserve Chardonnay 2014 from the Hunter Valley.

Having said this, with some 60% of the 95 point (or above) wines between them, the two titans of Aussie chardonnay are the Yarra Valley and Margaret River. It should be noted, however, that the Yarra Valley has consistently outperformed Margaret River when it comes to the ratio of 95 point (and above) wines compared to entries.

As I written on more than one occasion, the Yarra Valley, about 50 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, is, in my opinion. Australia's premier wine region of the moment. And although a Yarra Valley chardonnay is yet to win the challenge surely it's just a matter of time. At the Yarra Valley Wine Show, an impressive 14 out of about 90 chardonnay entries scored 95 points or above, earning them each a gold medal and making chardonnay not only a thrilling class to judge but the class that dominated the trophies.

There wasn't much between the top four wines: Yering Station Reserve Chardonnay 2013, which won the trifecta of best chardonnay, best white wine and best wine trophies; Coldstream Hills Reserve Chardonnay 2013; Seville Estate Reserve Chardonnay 2014; and Oakridge 864 Funder & Diamond Drive Block Chardonnay 2013, which won the best single vineyard white wine trophy. What all these wines have in common is superb purity as well as perfectly integrated acidity, giving an assurance that, as good as they are now, they will age brilliantly. This was evidenced by the Seville Estate Reserve Chardonnay 2010, which won best museum wine at the show and is still very vibrant and fresh.

Screwcaps – a French invention pioneered (unsuccessfully it should be added) by Australia in the 1970s took off after Clare Riesling producers bottled their 1999s under stelvin. Screwcaps are playing an important part in giving these wines longevity. The idea that Australian chardonnay can improve over five years and indeed longer is relatively new and something to be celebrated.

The Yarra is also leading the way in the production of single vineyard chardonnay and there are now a number of producers making wines from chardonnay and pinot noir that are a reflection of both the sub region and the vineyard. It's also interesting to note that there are a growing number of vineyards in Australia where the same fruit is being made into single vineyard wines by more than one producer. Lusatia Park with chardonnay and pinot noir in the cool upper Yarra and the Warner Vineyard dedicated to shiraz in in Beechworth are two such examples.

Modern Australian Chardonnay has evolved enormously over the last ten years and there is a common theme amongst many producers with natural yeast fermentations, relatively high solids, the reduction of new oak, picking fruit at lower baume levels (whether physiologically ripe or not) and using less malolactic fermentation all playing a part.