

WINEFRONT

M O N T H L Y

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Talking straight and fair about wine.

IN THIS EDITION:

Pinot, Pinot and Pinot, Winefront has gone mad on pinot (or that's how it's all worked out anyway). This month there are features on:

TAPANAPPA

the new Brian Croser adventure, plus a fascinating discussion with:

JEFFREY GROSSET

and a brilliant article by Tyson Stelzer on the all-conquering

LOUEE

There's also a special report on:

BINDI

PLUS:

- 2002 Bordeaux
- 2003 Burgundy
- The new bright shining star named Bell Hill
- A look at the pure magic of Tarrington Vineyards
- Jasper Hill, Saltram Number One, Penley Estate and more ...
lots and lots of reviews ...

BINDI

A man in a pinot noir landscape

The man who runs one of Australia's most elite wine estates drives a Magna that is not new. I know, because I'm following it as we drive across the grass of his land, dipping through gullies and over the hard rocks that jut from the land. It's a sizeable property, 170 hectares, just 40 minutes along the freeway from the heart of Melbourne. Keeping a property like that intact so close to a capital city is not going to be easy, not when it's a family property, in the family name since the 1950s. Land – prime land – is money, or has to earn it. Or else it's broken up. It's not the way Michael Dhillon, who's lived and loved and longed for the property pretty much all his life and who now grows the vines there – it's not the way Michael Dhillon would like to think on it, but it's a daily pressure nonetheless. Make it great, make it worthwhile, or move on – and rip your heart out along with it. There's no real other way to look at it. No escape clause. Never underestimate the burning attachment a man can develop for his land; Michael Dhillon without that property to walk on would be a shell of the ideal he is today.

And Michael Dhillon, who grows the wines sold under the Bindi name, is an ideal – the first time I

saw him was probably five years ago now, and a more striking lad you rarely do see. He looks like an exotic version of a young Elvis Presley. The exotic bit perhaps coming from the fact that his father, Bill, is Indian, hence the Indian name for the winery – a bindi is the ornamental red circle worn by many Hindu women in the centre of their forehead. Bindi, a holy spot – to women of religion, and to the religion of wine. Dhillon is 37, has already notched a nomination as Australian Winemaker of the Year, has just had his Bindi Original Vineyard pinot noir placed in the top 101 Australian wines in the latest Langton's Classification, and with arguably the best of the estate's vineyards still to reach maturity – everything is going beautifully at Bindi. That Bindi has earned such high market acceptance in a difficult Australian pinot noir market doesn't hurt either.

"Bindi is a place, it's not a brand," Michael says, and he says it at the end rather than at the start, after we've talked for hours. He says it as the winter sun dies, a worker in the vineyard 100 yards off suddenly barely visible. We've been talking about the other wine, the shiraz that Michael makes with grapes grown at Heathcote. He sells this other wine under the name Bundaleer, for \$35. Remarkably few people have heard of it. "I suspect that if we called it Bindi shiraz, rather than Bundaleer, we could charge \$10 a bottle more, and sell it quicker. But we've held our line on it. Bindi has to make money to survive, but it has to be more than that.

"Mind you," he adds, "I love making our shiraz. It has a start and an end point – we decide when to pick the grapes, and how to make the wine, mature it and bottle it. And that's it. With the pinot, I have 35 years of history invested in it, and 35 years of future, and I can never divorce myself from it, there's no start, no end."

The emotion that runs through the whole Bindi wine endeavour is as palpable as it is infectious. Stand on the edge of the vineyard and watch the play of light across it, the jutting quartz glistening in the sun.

BINDI: By Campbell Mattinson

The light radiates upwards, the warmth, like there's gold in them there hills. It's a magic sight, from a magic site. "Our view is," Michael says, a voice-over to the force of the land before us, "that there are a lot of vineyard sites that will make really good chardonnay, but not many that will make interesting pinot noir, or pinot with a strong personality, or pinot with real ageworthiness. We think we've got one of those sites here – I almost feel like we have a moral obligation to follow this course, and to see how good the pinot noir can be from here. In some ways it's just the responsible thing to do."

The responsible thing maybe – not the easy thing. To make pinot noir in Australia is to have a very thick hide, something it's very hard to have when you have an emotional attachment for your place. No one agrees on pinot noir, no matter where it's grown, but getting people to support Australian pinot noir is more difficult again. There are a certain number of pinot noir lovers who will countenance nothing but the red wines of Burgundy, no matter the growing evidence to the contrary. There are certain pinot noir lovers who, if they're not buying Burgundy, are swooning over Central Otago or Oregon or the cooler parts of California. Bindi has been lucky ("for a 16 year old vineyard, we've had tremendous acceptance and respect"), but he's also very aware of reality: "We're still learning, we're still growing our vines – it's frustrating, because people judge you on every wine, of every vintage, but we're well aware that we've got a big body of work in front of us, and that the body of work that's ahead of us will be more defining than what's come before. With vineyards, and especially with pinot noir vineyards, you've got to talk in big windows. If you're not talking big windows, then you're not facing reality."

"I learnt very early that wine takes a long time – it takes three years to get a crop, and another two years to age it. So you have to have a long-term perspective, hurrying won't get you anywhere. You also have to be secure in what you're doing, and know that you're on the right track, because it's very easy to get battered around in the wind of impatience. Vineyards are about decades and centuries, they're not about years."

And if you concentrate on the years, you find too much heartache to contemplate – in both 1999 and 2001 Bindi lost a significant amount of its crop to frost, decimating its income. This decimation led to the creation of the Bundaleer Heathcote shiraz – like

most vineyards, Bindi didn't start to become financial until it was ten years old, and just when it could start to make a living for the folk who worked it, the frost years came, two years out of three.

Now, in 2005 – and with a frost minimisation system in place – Dhillon finally feels like the place can start to get ahead a little. There is a mistaken belief in the new world, always calculated on single costs from a single year, that great wine can be made without great expense – it is very rarely so. It is no co-incidence that Australia's most historically famous winemakers – Maurice O'Shea, Max Schubert, Colin Preece and Roger Warren – all made their great wines with the backing of big or biggish wine companies behind them. Until recent decades, no one has made great wine in Australia from a tiny independent estate; and there is a reason for that. The yields of a single year are not the only factor, though even so the Bindi yields are miserly: averaging less than 1.5 tonne to the acre.

Dhillon is honest about his own wines – one of the hardest things to be. "Bindi is 17 years old, but our best wines are probably 15 years away. I don't think we really got a handle on chardonnay until the 2000 vintage, and what we're noticing is that the original vineyard is very vintage specific, and wears the vintage conditions on its sleeve, while the Block 5 is vineyard specific; it pretty much tastes like a Block 5 wine most years.

"It was interesting how we came up with splitting the wine into Block 5 and Original Vineyard – one day I was walking up the rows tasting grapes, and as I walked up and down it was like turning the sound up and down, the flavours at one end of the vineyard were so different, according to how much quartz there is in the ground." The Bindi property is full of quartz, some of it shattered and some of it not, some of it big and chunky and exposed. Not all of the property though is suitable for vines, with vast sections made mostly of (in Dhillon's words) "chocolatey soil", and other areas still covered by native bush and grassland. In keeping with the long-term view of the property, a managed plantation of eucalypts has been planted, suitable for high grade furniture – Dhillon has in the back of his mind that someone, at some time, will make a play for the property to be sold, and he might just be able to keep them financially happy (and keep the property in family hands) by selling off the plantation forest.

Bit by bit, plan by plan, it's all coming together –

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the most recent area of vineyard to go in, Block K Pinot Noir, was planted in 2001, and Dhillon suspects that this latest vineyard might actually turn out to be the estate's best – knowing what they now know about how the vines perform in the differing soils, this Block K vineyard promises to be in the best spot of all. It means that the overall composition of the Bindi vineyards now sits like this:

Chardonnay, planted 1988.

Original Vineyard pinot noir, 1988

Quartz chardonnay, 1988

Block 5 pinot noir, 1992

Block K pinot noir, 2001.

From these, three single vineyard wines are made: Bindi Quartz Chardonnay, Bindi Original Vineyard Pinot Noir, and Bindi Block 5 Pinot Noir. The new range – which is really the 'standard' pinot and chardonnay re-badged, is now called Composition, for obvious reasons. The aim and intent is clear: terroir is important, personality in each wine a prime requirement.

Down to tin tacks: the Bindi vineyard is not run biodynamically, but to some extent only because the occasional high priest of biodynamics has put Dhillon off. He does use biodynamic preparations on his land, and he's never used pesticides. "We're just interested in having a healthy vineyard," Dhillon says, "it makes sense to have a healthy land. We make and use our own composts, we remove weeds by hand, and we're finally getting to the point where we are able to afford to treat our vineyard softer. It's a great time now, because a lot of people are really thinking about how they go about things. We have a very sensitive landscape in Australia – our landscape tells us pretty quickly if we make a mistake. Treating your vineyard softer is actually much like treating grapes from different parts of your vineyard differently: it is all about listening really hard to what your land and your grapes are telling you. Very slight differences in aspect or soil or approach can make profound difference to the end wine – but you really have to be listening to notice those initial differences."

They are differences Michael Dhillon has been spinning towards all his life – but most particularly for the past 20 years. After going to Essendon Grammar School he studied economics at Monash University, and with his first pay packet he bought bottles of Redbank's Sally's Paddock, and Cape Mentelle cabernet – family estates them both – not

your usual grog for a uni student. He knew, from the first time he tasted a Heathcote shiraz from the Hanging Rock winery, that wine had him hooked. Three years later, there were vines reaching into the ground at the family farm.

The family farm. The Bindi vineyard. It sits on the edge of an old Mt Gisborne lava flow. Its quartz soils can make its wine growing, and even at times its wine drinking, difficult to enjoy – but almost always an experience. Open a bottle of Bindi and know for certain: Michael Dhillon, who has known this land all his life and who wants to keep knowing it to the end of him, will have heard and felt and nurtured every creak of it.

Bindi Composition Chardonnay 2004 (\$39): Super-fresh and super-fine, a joy to drink. Light coloured, essence of nectarine, fresh and lingering with added flavours of crushed apples and pear juice. Gorgeous young chardonnay. Sweet and sour and delicious. Drink: 2005-2009. 92 points.

Bindi Quartz Chardonnay 2004 (\$66): Powerful, glycerol, chalky, talcy. Very intense, alcohol-woven palate, full of dramatic oomph. Pear-like characters usher in after time in the glass, but this is exceptionally powerful and of exceptional quality. Drink: 2006-2011. 94 points.

Bindi Original Vineyard Pinot Noir 2004 (\$59): Very ripe, very powerful, showing a bit of oak at this early stage and quite a deal of herbal complexity too. The full shebang. Rose-petals and a purple pitch of fine tannin, with a raft of squashed black cherries brooding in the background. Very young. Very powerful. Drink: 2007-2012. 91 points.

Bindi Block Five Pinot Noir 2004 (\$82): Meaty, spicy, packed with powerful cherries and cedar and spice, with waves of complex fruit crashing through the finish. An outstanding Block Five. Lots of lovely dry tannin, in the context of purity and cleanliness. Needs time, but is very good. Drink: 2009-2015. 94 points.

Bundaleer Heathcote Shiraz 2004 (\$39): Beautifully balanced. Lovely clovey, sandy, cedary, fresh red-black fruit on a bed of savoury tannins. Will cellar well for ten years: this is even and balanced, and not at all overblown. Drink: 2006-2015. 92 points.

A full set of reviews of the Bindi pinot noirs of the past ten years will be available on the Winefront Monthly website when the search function is added in a month or so.

LOUEE

Riding the wild edge of Nullo Mountain

For a long time it looked like this moment would never come.

In the cold silence after the harvest, Phil Murray paused at the edge of the vineyard. The athlete lingered in the empty stadium to relive the moment. The victory was secured. His fight was over. Another battle had been won. The impossible pinot noir was in the truck.

In the soft outline of headlamp light, his gaze followed the line of the vines into the night. Ghostly wisps of ash-grey cloud sliced the inky darkness, rolling between the vines and gliding out of sight over the ridge. The icy tentacles of the mid-April wind slipped through the seams of his shirt, the sodden mist leaving diamonds of condensation on his skin. The man stood frozen in that moment to soak it in, to outface the sky and the clouds and the wind, to confront this place where nature shows itself at its most reckless extreme.

It is a place where the very earth stretches 1100m skyward to tease the heavens. The ground looms into a sheer cliff from the Bylong valley far below, to the peak of Nullo Mountain in the New South Wales central ranges. Perched atop the cloud-draped mountain, this lone vineyard ranks as Australia's highest.

Here a vine stands exposed to the fury of the elements, clenching its stones for dear life, like a lighthouse clinging to a battered coastline. A thin veil of trees stands as its only protection from the sheer drop just metres from the vineyard's edge.

Custodian of these frail vines on the edge of the

range, Louee Wines' vineyard manager Phil Murray had felt the full force of what nature could deal out. From his vantage point that night, he caught a glimpse through the mist of the shed which he had erected some 40 metres from the vineyard. His mind flashed back to the weekend when he found its roof dumped some fifty metres down the paddock, ripped clean off by a passing gale.

It was the rain that ranked as the most threatening force that he'd seen nature gather against the vines. One year, between Christmas and the start of harvest in mid-March, Nullo Mountain clawed twelve inches of moisture from the sky. Drains were his only hope of maintaining the vines, snaking their way through every row. But even the best drainage did nothing for the high humidity, and its tendency to promote downy mildew and botrytis. The 2003 season brought it with quite an onslaught, and Phil recalled intensive days of working through the vineyard, bucket in hand, painstakingly removing botrytis-affected fruit bunch by bunch.

These were hand-rescued grapes. Picking, removing rocks from mid-rows, even weeding – it was all done by hand. It took intensive care to maintain a biodynamic philosophy atop a rain-drenched mountain.

There were times when nature put on such a show that even the most diligent vineyard manager could do nothing but watch from the sidelines. Dark thunder heads would build and intensify around the mountains, pelting hail at the frail young vines. Their first victim, the entire crop of 2003 sauvignon blanc.

This was a site of extraordinary extremes. A wet 2003 was followed by the worst drought in a century. Phil's mind cast back three months, sweating in the white heat of the summer sun, and an hour later looking for his coat. Six months, and 14 chilling days straight of spring frost. Nine months, and freezing at nine degrees below zero. Ten months, and trudging through the glistening silence of a snow-smothered vineyard. Up here, vines fought to ripen their fruit, aided only by warm winds which billowed up the

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escarpment from the valley below.

Against such odds, a successful vintage was a challenge, and the end of vintage, a relief. For Phil Murray, that moment in the vineyard in April 2004, with the last of the crop safely in the truck, was a moment of triumph. As he stood over the vineyard, his stance was one of victory; a hint of a smile creased across his tired face.

Reaching forward, a pinot-purple-stained hand pushed shut the gate that stood as a sentinel to guard this fragile garden. Its six-foot-high mass clicked firmly into position, completing the prison-like fence that protected the vineyard from the beasts of the night.

Prior to the fence, Phil remembered droves of kangaroos, wallabies and rabbits bounding out of Wollomi National Park, which borders the vineyard on all sides. The fence saved the vines' tender shoots, but did nothing to stop the wombats from digging at their roots. He added mesh between the fence and the ground and four lines of electric wires to deter them from clawing their way under it. Still not enough; they then dug under the gate. A large log along the bottom of the gate finally kept them at bay.

After fastening the padlock, he hooked the overhead bird netting in place over the gate. This was the first year of netting, and as he secured it he recalled the previous year, and wished he'd got in quicker. It was while the small crop of pinot noir was going through veraison that they started considering whether it was worth picking. After a week they decided to go ahead, but it was already too late. The Currawongs had taken to it, cleaning out the entire crop. Not a grape was left.

As Phil turned to head back to the truck, the stump of a vine at the end of the row caught his attention, flashing him back to a morning just three weeks earlier when he came upon the most puzzling setback of his career. No efforts to abate the elements or the wildlife could have averted what he discovered that March morning.

The shock came as he was working through the vineyard picking out botrytis-affected fruit. Turning into a new row, he was confronted by a vine slashed at the trunk. Completely cut off; fruit and leaves savagely hacked from their lifeline. Closer inspection revealed a clean cut, a deliberate secateur slice. Down the row, there was another. And another. And in the next row. And the next. Three rows and a couple of

hundred pinot noir vines in all. Not every vine, just the better developed ones. A calculated and malicious act of sabotage. A hole slashed into one end of the bird net was the only clue. Despite a \$1000 reward, to this day there has been no hint as to the perpetrator or the motive.

When Phil Murray turned toward the truck on that cold April night, he turned his back on the hardest vintage of his life. A vintage in which the elements, the wildlife and one savage individual had conspired against his every attempt to get that fruit to the point of going into the truck. A vintage in which others would have given up long ago. But the man who lives by the motto that "whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," responded simply by digging another trench, putting another cyclone strap in the shed roof, building another fence, adding another hot wire, suspending another net and retraining another stump.

Tonight, for the first time, it was all worthwhile. The first ever vintage of Nullo Mountain pinot noir – just four tonnes of it – was safely in the truck. Parked in the swirling mist on the ridge of the mountain that gave it life and very nearly took it back again, this load of grapes was Phil Murray's victory wreath; a testimony to six years of back-breaking work in a demanding vineyard on the wild edge of a temperamental mountain.

As he started the engine, he knew that Nullo Mountain's final challenge still lay before him.

Louee Wines is situated in the middle of nowhere, outside of the small historic township of Rylstone, perched high in the Great Dividing Range in the wilderness between Mudgee, the Hunter Valley and Orange. From Louee to the Nullo Mountain vineyard is a full half-kilometre rise in elevation and at best a forty-five minute drive. The state of the road must qualify the vineyard among the most inaccessible and isolated in Australia.

It was 10pm when he began the trek down the mountainside. He had been on the mountain since daybreak, 16 hours earlier, and it would be at least an hour-and-a-half before he reached the winery. The truck rocked its way along the cracked and corrugated dirt road, bins of grapes swaying in time to the rhythm of the surface. He dodged ruts and mud patches, and stopped to remove a fallen branch from his path. The truck growled down the steep slopes in low gear. Stock passed by, grazing on the road. At least a dozen cattle grids juddered under the wheels.

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On more than one occasion he swerved to avoid herds of kangaroos bounding momentarily into vision before slipping silently back into the blanket of fog.

But nothing deterred him that night. He'd driven this road a thousand times, as if in anticipation of this moment, as if rehearsing for this final victory lap around Nullo Mountain, on the night when he reclaimed the pinot noir from the mountain.

When I met Phil Murray and heard the story, I couldn't figure it out. Somehow it didn't make sense.

"Why? Why keep on with four hectares of near-inaccessible vineyard in which the weather and the wildlife and the vandals conspire to decimate every crop? There are vast expanses of far more hospitable land lying unused nearby. No one in their right mind would plant vines in such a God-forsaken place without a darned good reason. Why go through with Nullo Mountain?"

"Jump in the truck," he grinned, "and I'll show you."

The late June sun was just a flicker in the east when we stepped out into the early morning chill. The misty scene immediately flashed me back to the great vineyards of the world. The sheer slopes of the Rhone Valley, the garden plots of Burgundy, the northern chill of Champagne, the expanse of Bordeaux. Vineyards that define the very fringes of viticultural feasibility, riding the razor-sharp edge of earth and sky, stretching their vines to painstaking limits to bleed out of them, under near-impossible circumstances, wines of remarkable character.

As the clouds parted around the vines of Nullo Mountain, the picture was revealed of Australian viticulture at its extreme. At its highest. Vines aligned perfectly, like soldiers in a row, not a cane out of place. Imprisoned on all sides by six-foot barricades and four lines of hot wire.

It was a picture interrupted abruptly by the words of Len Evans, replaying in my mind from a conversation two days earlier in the Hunter Valley.

"Terroir is bullshit," he announced, in exactly those words. He was emphasising that the hand of the maker is all too often brushed over in suggesting that it is the terroir that makes the wine. But it was the bullshit part that stuck with me, slicing through the hazy dawn silence of the mountain.

I looked up, confronted by the six-foot fence, looming skyward in front of me as if it were a monument erected in opposition to Evans' statement. As if some little unheard of winery in the back blocks of an unknown region had erected an impossible vineyard on the side of a near-unreachable mountain, and year-in, year-out, put themselves through more than their fair share of bullshit for no other reason than this. Than terroir. As clichéd, as overused and as misused as what it is, there is no other word for it. Sheer terroir. Extreme terroir. Terroir quite unlike any other I have seen in this country. Terroir that transcends all manner of bullshit to work magic on grapes.

Magic, alright.

"If that's not the best wine I've made in 25 years, I don't know what is!" David Lowe later told me. Winemaker at Lowe Family Wine Company in Mudgee, David shares the winemaking for Louee Wines with Jane Wilson. He was speaking of the 2005 Louee Nullo Mountain Riesling.

"The macroclimate of Nullo Mountain is responsible for the quality of the fruit. The vineyard gives us material which is genuinely exciting," he explained. "This is wilderness country and for a wine to show such finesse, elegance and style is a triumph."

"Natural fruit acidity is a godsend to winemakers. Apart from Tasmania, these wines have some of the highest natural acidities in Australia. The wines ripen so powerfully up here, with sugars levels producing alcohols three to four degrees higher than Germany, but with the same high acidity."

David has a close relationship with Germany's Giesenheim University in Rheingau, and for the last three years he has enjoyed the assistance of students from the university during vintage. "They have been really helpful with the Nullo Mountain wines as they understand the cold climate style," David said. "Their input and attention to detail have enabled us to develop a style unfamiliar to the Australian wine fraternity."

Doing things differently has always been the way of Louee. Tony Maxwell, who manages the business alongside Rod James, tells the story of how a childhood memory prompted the beginning of the whole operation. "When we first set out to find a site, we looked at three or four places in Mudgee, but they were just more of the same. We wanted something different, something suited to delicate whites. We also

knew that we needed water – one of the biggest problems in Mudgee.”

“Then I remembered back to my childhood. Growing up as a kid, we often went on family holidays up to Dabee Station, a big old historical mansion near Rylstone. We hadn’t been there for yonks, but I distinctly remembered how wet it was up there.”

He immediately drove up to Rylstone, took a look in the window of the local stock and station agent and discovered a site not far out of town at Cox’s Creek.

That site is now the home of “Louee,” or to the local aboriginal people, “place of plentiful water.” A small cellar door overlooks 65 hectares of shiraz, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, petit verdot, verdelho and chardonnay. The Nullo Mountain site was acquired not long after, adding just four hectares of riesling, sauvignon blanc, pinot gris, pinot noir and nebbiolo to the company’s holdings.

Most of the Cox’s Creek vineyard fruit is sold to other producers in the area, with a small quantity from an “icon” area of each vineyard held back for Louee’s own wines. This vineyard has had its own share of problems. “If bad drainage is the issue on Nullo, down here it’s the soil,” explained Phil Murray.

Under a thin topsoil layer lies a thick, bleached band of earth, so acidic that it forces the roots out to rummage in the mid-rows, stunting vine growth. It took successive ripping of the rows with a plough followed by multiple soil treatments before any reasonable yield was achieved. According to Phil, “The difference is remarkable – the vines have kicked away like a rocket!”

Soil problems solved, the next threat to hit the vineyard was locusts. “Bloody locusts, we had a load of ‘em last year. They eat the vines, they love ‘em!” recounted an annoyed Phil. “A whole row was pretty much defoliated.”

Tony Maxwell remains upbeat in spite of the setbacks. “I don’t think anybody goes through an easy time in establishing a new vineyard. We’ve had some devastating trauma and grief, but we don’t dwell on those things.”

And it’s not getting easier. Tony: “We’re trying to cut costs at the moment. We couldn’t move any of our Rylstone cabernet this year, so it was left hanging on the vines. No one seems to like central New South Wales cabernet at the moment.”

For any pioneer of a new region, experimentation and setbacks are just part of the deal. But there is always an undertone of excitement when the results are as promising as they are for Louee Wines. It’s nothing less than remarkable that a little winery in an unheard of region with its oldest vines barely seven years of age is able to pull wines of the quality of these. No less remarkable for the consumer is the fact that the most expensive of the wines sell for just 20 dollars.

We live in exciting wine times. Times in which the Australian industry is in many ways coming of age, and yet at the same time just discovering itself. Times in which some of the most promising regions of the future lie dormant and unstirred; awaiting courageous pioneers to step up and usher in the wines of tomorrow. These will be spirited individuals with the hide to outface the most reckless extremes that this vast country will rally against them; the wild variabilities of land, of sky, and not least of market forces and consumer preferences.

In years to come, as Rylstone develops the recognition that it deserves as a wine region, the story of Louee will, no doubt, be upheld as an example of what can be achieved against all odds. And the terroir of Nullo Mountain will be its ultimate triumph.

Reviews by Tyson Stelzer

Louee Nullo Mountain Riesling 2005 (\$18) screwcap: Lifted lemon blossom, clean lime juice and crunchy green apple, with a hint of Turkish delight; this is a tightly focused riesling with an epic finish. It’s delicately poised, perfectly balanced and finely structured. The cold climate of Nullo Mountain creates characteristically fine, minerally acid which lingers long on the finish. This is the best Louee riesling yet, and a refined wine by any standard. Drink: 2005-2015. 94 points (TS)

Louee Nullo Mountain Late Picked Riesling 2004 (\$18) screwcap: The botrytis wine that wasn’t. Fruit was left on the vines a full month after the first picking, but received not a single drop of rain. Nullo Mountain may be prone to botrytis, but not on demand! Harvested instead in early May for a sweet late pick style, and the wine is none the less for it. It’s all gorgeous poached quince, spicy pear and cinnamon. Fine, tight acidity is the hallmark, perfectly offset by soft sweetness. It outclasses its price point many times over. Drink: 2005-2015. 94 points. (TS)

Louee Nullo Mountain Pinot Gris 2005 (\$18)

screwcap: I can't go past delicate, cool climate pinot gris, and this wine is right where it's at! Fresh, straight-off-the-tree pear fruit with perfumed lemon blossom and a shake of spicy cloves. Gently whole-bunch pressed, with a portion of pressings blended back for mid-palate weight. There's a touch of palate sweetness which is cleverly balanced by fine acidity on a long finish. Drink: 2005-2007. 92 points. (TS)

Louee Tongbong Chardonnay 2004 (\$18): Grapefruit and melon with obvious cashew nut French oak. Hand-picked and whole bunch pressed, this is a tightly strung chardonnay with fine, lemony acidity and good length. Drink: 2005-2009. 90 points. (TS)

Louee Cox's Crown Verdelho 2005 (\$18) screwcap: Elegant citrus and tropical fruits are let down by a short finish and hard phenolics. Drink: 2005-2005. 84 points. (TS)

Louee Nullo Mountain Sauvignon Blanc 2005 (\$18) screwcap: The bouquet is an enticing mix of crushed black currant buds, green passion fruit and orange citrus with herbaceous undertones, but it's quite at odds with a sweet, tropical palate. There is potential for sauvignon blanc on Nullo Mountain – maybe next year? Drink: 2005-2006. 84 points. (TS)

Louee Nullo Mountain Pinot Noir 2004 (\$20) screwcap: After the ordeal on the mountain, this fruit was given intensive care. Some whole bunches were included in the ferment, it was pumped over gently by both hand and foot and then matured in 1-3 year old French hogsheads. For all that, it should be a good wine, and it is. Red currants, red cherries, strawberries and earth, this is a light-bodied savoury/spicy pinot noir with fine tannins, attractive acidity and good length – at a bargain price. Drink: 2005-2009. 90 points. (TS)

Louee Runkers Peak Shiraz 2003 \$18: Hand-picked from the back shiraz block at the Rylstone vineyard, this wine is proof of the potential of the region. The worst drought in a century concentrated the berries, producing a wine with succulent blue berry fruit, spice, star anise, tar and mint flavours. Fermented in small batches in open vats and matured in French and American oak, which leave their stamp on the wine and dictate time in the cellar for it to integrate. Tight, mouth-filling tannins and good length. Drink 2008-2012. 92 points. (TS)

Tyson Stelzer is the author of numerous books, and will shortly launch a new website, www.tysonstelzer.com.

What the PR staff don't want you to say ...

Look, there's no point in me mentioning the whereabouts of the dinner because as much will be proven without it, but let me say this: the dinner I'm at has been organised as a showcase of a major region's wines, and three quarters of the way through the evening two things happen that make it go pear-shaped.

The first is that, after maybe five courses and 15 wines, I realise that the food is crackerjack good, just fantastic, but the wines are damn ordinary. This is supposed to be a regional showcase, but of the 15 wines served (three per course) maybe five have been borderline faulty, five have been just plain dull, two have been good but unexceptional and three have actually been excellent, no problems with them. From a large-ish region that gets a lot of airplay, I think two things: politics dragged down many a region, and the behind the scenes politics that put these wines up for display must (I hope) have been disastrous. Note to the Australian wine industry: every market will look tough if your wines aren't up to it. There are lots of excellent producers who are selling their wines without a problem right now. Really. The best marketing sits right there in the bottle.

The second thing is unrelated, but related: the person I'm sitting next to at this dinner is a person who is a major winemaking player within this region. He makes wine, and has grown up in a winemaking family. He admits to me on this night that he has never, not once, ever tasted or drunk any Giaconda wine.

I mean, is it just me, or is that staggering? It's not like I can afford to knock back Giacondas willy nilly, but a winemaker making wine in Australia, with quality ambitions, who has never tasted any of the benchmark Giacondas? I don't know, I could be wrong, but I would hazard to guess that the standard of wine at this dinner and this little admission are not completely exclusive of one another.

But that's just me, how about this: wine writer Huon Hooke, at a separate function in a different region, was asked to comment on his findings as chairman of the Wine Show of Western Australia recently. After noting that there was a wealth of "highlights" in virtually all 39 of the show's classes, he then added this: but "there was (also) a lot of crook wine, a lot of brett – in some classes, 25-30% of the wines were brett-affected. If the industry thinks it is on top of brett, it isn't."

Bet the WA producers weren't expecting that.

GROSSET

Jeffrey Grosset is a fascinating study of an Australian winemaker who cares.
His story affects drinkers of all wine styles ...

Jeffrey Grosset is in a good place – but it’s taken time to get there. He’s finally got his vineyards where he’d like them to be, which means that he’s finally at the point where he’s no longer buying in grapes. “We had exclusivity over the sites we were buying from, but you can’t really expect growers to go to the lengths that we want to go to. Our approach to viticulture is to get every bunch of grapes as close to equal ripeness as possible, which you can never really achieve, but with us in control we can get close to it.” Another good thing is that he’s finally – finally – getting on top of the screwcap debate. A debate, let’s face it, that he’s stuck at for too long.

The control over where and how his grapes are grown is a major step forward; in effect a major step towards getting his wines to the place he’s been trying, since 1981, to get them to. “We think we’ll get the wines looking even more focussed and intense, with perhaps less breadth of fruit flavour but more focus, more tightness – to the point where I think people will notice it.”

It’s an interesting statement for Jeffrey Grosset to make, not so much in itself but in context. The Grosset wines, particularly the riesling wines, are considered to be tight and focussed now. Jeffrey Grosset, the man, is as steely and intense as his wines. Perfection, whether it be in the way the vines are grown, the way the wines are made, or in the way the bottles are sealed, is the only goal he’s capable of pursuing – so much so that he doesn’t notice it himself.

“It’s taken me a long time to admit openly that, yes, I am aspiring to greatness.” A statement it is very difficult for any Australian to make – for fear of ridicule – even if the heart of it is pure, noble, and enviable.

“When I first started in the early 1980s,” he says, “I

didn’t have a model I was aiming at, I didn’t have a mentor, the Polish Hill River area was not then considered the best – in fact a lot of the long-time winemakers of the area thought that the Polish Hill River area was sub-standard to other areas in the Clare. I had the simple idea that I would make my own wine here, and that I would not compromise the wines – that was it, zero compromise on the wines themselves, and if there was to be compromise, then it would be in other areas. From there I thought I would sell the wines pretty much just locally, with maybe some into Sydney and Melbourne too. Clare riesling, and a cabernet blend. I never ever thought, back then, that people overseas would drink my wines.

“But you know, even with modest ambitions, it’s not easy. I didn’t have much money, I’d used all my own money and borrowed some from my parents and had even borrowed some money from a lender of last resort – I remember thinking to myself: I just can’t afford for this not to work.”

Not that it meant taking short steps on anything. “I planted the Gaia vineyard (which is a cabernet-based vineyard) at 570 metres (above sea-level, high for cabernet) because I thought Clare reds were beautifully ripe and bold – but I wanted a little more fruit definition, a little more fruit freshness, and maybe, if I got things right, a little more finesse. It wasn’t an easy time up on that vineyard though – it’s windy, and I’d plant wind-break trees and they’d just blow over.

“My father helped me a lot in those first years, and he later said to me: if it was 3am in the middle of vintage, and we were all exhausted, and a crusher wasn’t cleaned properly – I would never hesitate, I’d always say that it had to be cleaned before we left, I was so intent on the wines being perfect that it never crossed my mind to think of how tired people were, or of what I was asking. It had to be pointed out to me – that I am obsessive about quality, it’s just the way I naturally am.”

That perfectionist trait, and the fact that he was named the Qantas Winemaker of the Year, helped to change the course of wine – at least in Australia, and quite possibly the world. Without the combination of

GROSSET: By Campbell Mattinson

the two, the screwcap revolution may never have happened.

It's not such a long bow to draw – because while, of course, a group of New Zealand winemakers have pushed screwcaps with force, much of the initial drive harks back to Jeffrey Grosset, and there is no doubt that both here and internationally Jeffrey Grosset has become the screwcap's most important, and prominent, spokesman.

The role of the perfectionist in him needs little explanation – corks, when they work, are great, but they are imperfect, and unreliable – the role of the Qantas Winemaker of the Year award in this story perhaps needing a little more. When someone, anyone, wins a major award, it means nothing, and it means a lot. You are still the same person, but you walk in slightly different shoes, and for some this is a positive, it propels them to greater heights, and for others, it is a negative, the sense of added expectation dragging them down. When Jeffrey Grosset won the Australian winemaker of the year tag, it made him feel like he should do something with it; like he'd been given a baton as much as a prize.

"There is a lack of leadership in Australian wine," he says, "and there's a lack of a philosophical foundation. We have enormous talent and enthusiasm in this country, but we lack direction, and I think it's because we have a lot of information but not a lot of wisdom. From an international perspective, we are jammed: we have done the 'reliably good value' thing so well that now most people think that that's all we do well."

These are Jeffrey Grosset's thoughts now – and they have been for some time. In the second half of the 1990s, Grosset campaigned hard for label integrity on riesling – many Australian bottles and casks were still labelled as riesling, when indeed they were not. Such confusion, and misinformation, was not only doing riesling itself damage, but was robbing the Australian wine industry of one of its greatest assets. Australia makes world class riesling; rob it of its chance to assert its rightful place in the world, by diluting its reputation with phoney product, and you rob the reputation of Australian wine.

That battle won, the need for screwcaps pressed – wanting to practice what he preached, he decided that if no one else would, then he would lead the charge.

It means that Jeffrey Grosset will go down in history as a great figure, but the whole deal, and all the effort, has not always sat well with him. It's been a tortured

road.

Talking it through, he mentions that "it feels like I'm in a therapy session", but then he says: "Look, there came a moment when I felt like I was looking out the window at a car accident about to happen, and I had to make the decision: do I just watch and let it happen. Or do I do something to try and stop it?"

With the feeling that Australian wine was and is crying out for leadership; with a perfectionist's insistence that things must be made better; with the weight of Australia's most significant winemaking prize bearing down on him – Jeffrey Grosset decided to act, to do something, to stop the accident.

He decided to do something about the negative impact that so many corks have on wine. This is not necessarily a pro-screwcap stance – but a 'cork is not a good seal' stance. Jeffrey Grosset openly admits that if a superior closure came along, superior to screwcap, then he would consider it. He also admits that the price of leadership has been high.

"Between 1998 and 2003, I logged 1500 hours that I spent on the phone, answering calls from the media and from winemakers on screwcaps. It got to the stage where I thought, this is compromising my time to actually engage with my customers. It was a distraction. I was getting calls from America, from all over the world – screwcaps were taking over my whole life. I helped set up the Australian Closure Fund to try to take the pressure off myself – and also to dispel the myth that wine needs oxygen to age."

The problem was – in some ways – that in order to stop the accident from happening, Jeffrey Grosset had to stand in the way, and take the impact himself. He could easily have become a candidate for post traumatic stress.

"I've now got the enthusiasm back, the enthusiasm for wine that I had when I first started out. I've got that sense of urgency again. But a year ago, I was getting so distracted, so tired with it all, that it was really all starting to get to me.

"What I'm now trying to do is separate myself from feeling a responsibility for the industry. I'm just a little winemaker from the Clare Valley, and I have no illusions of my own importance."

Quite a journey. At a price.

"In the process of the past few years, I've lost a bit of momentum, not in the wine quality but in the contact with customers, in the feeling in the market about our wines. We've now got the vineyards where we need

GROSSET: By Campbell Mattinson

them to be, finally got a proper winery; we're in great shape from a wine perspective. But momentum has been lost, and I'm aware of it. The thing is, there are a lot of nice things in wine, but the thing that gives you the most satisfaction is the wine, and the personal feedback you get from the people who are drinking it."

Not that screwcaps don't still play on his mind. "I think with screwcaps that we probably missed an opportunity – screwcaps help winemakers take the next step in quality, and we probably should have pushed the message that we were making this change for quality reasons, for the quality of Australian wine, and not just for consistency or convenience. Quality was the driver, and should have been the main message – but we missed that opportunity, and internationally it may have been good if we hadn't."

And not that screwcaps – by presenting the natural character of the wine in all its pristine beauty – don't help Grosset in one of his principal wine aims. "There's a real buzz around about terroir, and that suits us fine, because we've been saying for 25 years that there's a difference between Polish Hill and Watervale, and that difference is terroir. There is something incredibly weak about the soil at Polish Hill River – our vines are nine years old, but they look 3 years old, the soil is so weak. It makes for incredible intensity in the fruit, it makes for different alcohols and different weights. Even the grape bunches look drastically different between Polish Hill and Watervale – at first we thought it was clonal, but we've cross-planted clones and it's not, it's the soil."

It's the soil, it's the tenderness in the vineyard, it's the application of thought, rather than the application of rules. "A lot of winemakers are fining their wines early, as a standard stage in the process, but we haven't fined Polish Hill riesling since 1986. We're prepared to fine if we have to, we just haven't had to for a very long time. If the day comes when we do, then we'll go back and say, What happened there? Was it the season, was the fruit damaged, what caused that?"

"Our view is that, when you plant something in a landscape, you want the plants to take on that landscape, and for the plants and the landscape to become a part of each other. I get the feeling that a lot of people plant vineyards and then try to impose them on the landscape, rather than getting them to fit in with it."

Jeffrey Grosset is one of Australia's finest producers. He is also a leader. As many of the leaders of both past and present have shown, it is almost impossible to

combine the two. Be glad, be praised: Jeffrey Grosset is back at the helm, great wines on his mind.

Grosset Watervale Clare Valley Riesling 2005 (\$37) screwcap: Brilliant length, brilliant regional typicity, aflame with lime and slate and ringing with spices and tropical flourishes and various other exotic temptations. Gorgeously pure and clean and long, and ready to rip any time from now. Drink: 2005-2013. 93 points.

Grosset Polish Hill Clare Valley Riesling 2005 (\$30) screwcap: It snaps like a snow pea. Crisp, long, intense, loaded with lime and minerals and filled out with a sublime sub-plot of tart tropical fruits. It's got so much elegance and style that just drinking it makes you feel like a better person. And what a gorgeous aftertaste. This is a great Polish Hill, stylish and subtle, focussed and long. Drink: 2005-2016. 95 points.

Grosset Clare Valley Adelaide Hills Semillon Sauvignon Blanc 2005 (\$25) screwcap: The pitch here is quite beautiful. It's juicy and fine and crisp, but there's substance to the palate and a richness on the finish, with grassy lemony characters then once again reasserting as an aftertaste. It is very difficult not to be impressed by this wine. It's got length, polish, richness and style, and the fruit has a sweetness to its ripeness – within the confines of it being an acidic style. Drink: 2005-2010. 92 points.

Grosset Pinot Noir 2004 screwcap: It needs to be decanted to show its best, though even given air it's hard work. The flavours are myriad though: ash, ripe plums, rubber, salt and black cherries, with a slink of caramel and a spicy bitterness on the finish. While there is substance and interest and style, it lacks appeal. Drink: 2007-2011. 84 points.

Grosset Picadilly Chardonnay 2003 screwcap: I suspect that it's showing its oak a bit more than usual, though the class of the fruit beneath is undoubted. Nectarines, lemons, toast, brass and butter, made better by a long, drawn-out finish. A very nice wine. Drink: 2005-2010. 90 points.

Grosset Clare Valley Gaia 2003 screwcap: Perfectly formed. What a stunningly elegant wine! Ripe, sure-footed, softly tannined and varietal, with blackcurrants and a gentle sashay of herbs rippling through the mouth. There's nothing desperately complex about it but at such a young age, that is no great criticism. This will age brilliantly. If balance is any wine's greatest virtue, then this wine is blessed. Drink: 2006-2016. 93 points.

Coonawarra Barrel Series Auction: 2005

The Coonawarra Barrel Series Auction will be held in Coonawarra on October 16 at 1.30pm. Full details are available at www.coonawarra.org, and a webcast of the auction will again be staged. The wines below are only available at this auction – they give an excellent insight into the characters of the vintage, but it should be stressed that these are not a pre-sample of commercially available wines. What these wines do show is that 2004 is a true, solid, classically-tempered Coonawarra vintage, full of flavour and style and without any great excesses of alcohol or herbaceousness; it's a business as usual vintage, after some wild years. All these wines talk Coonawarra, cleanly and clearly, but it might lack high notes.

Koonara Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: Tight as a drum – but there's a lot of promise here. It's clean and sandy and curranty, and although you wouldn't call it at all herbaceous, it states its variety clearly and well. It's got a lavender-like, mint-infused lift, a real firmness, juicy length and real grip. Elegant, but taut. Needs a few years at least. 90 points.

Zema Estate Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: Substantial, fruit-driven, dusty and even perhaps a touch raisiny, with choc-caramel oak smooching up to the dense black fruit. This is going to be a ripper. There's a lot of tannin here but the fruit swamps it, with graphite, mint and woody blackcurrant pulsing through the finish. High quality wine. 93 points.

Stonehaven Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: Excellent fruit intensity, black and solid, with varnished herbs filling it out. It powers beautifully through the mouth but then stumbles on the finish, limping over the line. It could just be its youth: once it softens it might flow outwards, like a wave on a shore. For now, it looks like one of the lesser wines in the parade. Though its depth and intensity of fruit cannot be questioned. 87 points.

Bowen Estate Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: A good, solid wine, if not outstanding. Smooth black fruit, mint and flytox, a nice juicy finish and just a trace of creamy oak. A good Coonawarra red, for drinking, with enough preserving tannin to keep it going at least medium term. 89 points.

Patrick T Wines Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: This is one of the biggest, boldest, oakiest offerings in this year's auction, and the truth is that it's also one of the best. It's rich and silky, massed with chocolate and black fruit, and yet it retains a true cabernet face, and cabernet waist-line. There's a line of spearmint hovering over the nose, and a lovely ripple of fine tannin. Quite gorgeous. 93 points.

DiGiorgio Family Wines Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: It's light and bright and perhaps lacking a bit of rump, though it's difficult to question either its cleanliness or its style. It flows nicely through the mouth, boasts a fine pull of drying tannin, finishes with a jump of alcohol and will likely add flesh with further time in the bottle. Not at the top of this group, but a good wine in its style. 88 points.

Katnook Estate Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: This is delicious. It's got a trace of reductiveness but it's otherwise full, frank and frocked-up, with a lake of chocolate and tar and liqueurous blackcurrant swimming through the mouth, and a ledge of busty tannins presented to perfection. I could go this. It's clearly a high class piece of aspirational wine, with an Italianate, attractive bitterness on its tail. It will fetch a bit. 94 points.

Brand's of Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: The milky, vanillin oak has been overdone, and it's clear that the oak treatment here is quite different to the wines above. The fruit's liqueurous, raw and strong, with cassis, aldehyde and musk screaming me! me! me! Be interested to see another bottle of this. Very good, but odd. 89 points.

Lindemans Coonawarra Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: There was quite a bit of cheesy, raw, sulphurous character in the wine I tasted, not a concern in a wine so young. It does though seem a bit volatile, a mask to the luscious blackcurrant-like fruit that blesses the palate. It's dry, and tannic, and warm, with oak that's been very well judged, and it has substance to the statement it's trying to make. 88 points.

Punters Corner Barrel Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: Distinguished, distinctive, a rock in its own place. Soy, salt, blackcurrant and lead – fascinatingly perfumed – it carves through your mouth like a tannin master, leaving fruit and acid in its wake. A polarising style, I suspect. I like it. 90 points.

S. Kidman Coonawarra Barrel Series 2004: There's a trace of salt and pepper on the nose of this wine, and it's the start of a show that's got arms and legs kicking in all directions. It's entertaining! As much bright red fruit as black, it's mulberried and juicy and flush with fine tannin, the finish revealing a raisiny sweetness. When you lean back in your chair and just drink this, you find that it's remarkably easy to do so; a good sign. 90 points.

Bell Hill

New Zealand's best pinot noir?

Just ten minutes drive from Waipara, New Zealand through the beautiful Weka Pass, you come to a little town called Waikari. There are two important things in Waikari, one is the Star and Garter Hotel, and if you are travelling, the whereabouts of the nearest watering hole is as important as petrol in the car. The other requires you to turn your back on the pub and look over the road to your left. Here you'll find a couple of well worn planks which allow you to cross a barbed-wire fence dotted with flecks of wool. A brief meander through the farmland, and you'll find yourself standing under a large limestone overhang decorated with Maori rock art – simple human figures, birds, dogs and if you use your imagination, what looks like a wine glass – well to me anyway. What's less arguable is this: it's a very special place.

And there is something very special going on here. Something special with the wine in the area.

It is here that a small band of like-minded winemakers and growers from estates like Bell Hill and Pyramid valley, are seeking out the purest expression of their respective vineyards, using Burgundian techniques and embracing the concept of terroir.

Bell Hill Vineyard was established in 1997 by Marcel Giesen and Sherwyn Veldhuizen, on the site of an old lime quarry just outside Waikari, off the Hawarden/Lake Sumner Road. They have already created a stir with their "Old Weka Pass Road" Pinot Noir, which is essentially the declassified Bell Hill Pinot fruit, as they waited for the vines to mature and got a handle on what this beautiful site could accomplish.

The Quarry block itself was planted in 1997 with Pinot Noir clones 113, 114, 667, 777 and 10/5 on their own rootstocks, and also 10/5 on 420A rootstock.

The following year the spectacular Shelf vineyard was planted with the same clones on rootstocks Ruggeri 140A, 420A and Fercal. Chardonnay clones 15, BDX 8021 and 6 were also planted and in 1999 the Limeworks block was planted out with pinot noir and

chardonnay. This is not a half-hearted endeavour; this is the real deal.

Like Burgundy, the Bell Hill vineyards have a high plant density. We're talking 9259 vines/ha in the Quarry block, 9090 vines/ha in the Limeworks block and 11,111 vines/ha on the Shelf block. That's some tightly packed vines! The idea here is to reduce yields and encourage the roots to adventure deep into that mineral limestone soil to bring out the 'sense of place' that is often (but not always) lacking in new world pinot noir. The aim is to produce the sort of expressive wines that the French seem to do so well.

The best way to get a sense of the soil structure here is to walk up to the top of the Shelf vineyard, where a track dissects the hillside. The soil profile is clearly visible with a thin topsoil layer, a thin layer of clay and lime chips, and then pure limestone. In fact, from this vantage point you can look over the surrounding countryside and see limestone outcrops popping up at regular intervals. It really is a beautifully kept vineyard, the vine spacing here is 0.9m with 1m between the rows which are scattered with lime chips. Wandering down the rows plucking off water shoots and chatting with Sherwyn it is plain to see a lot of focus and passion has gone into this site.

The first vintage of the Bell Hill Pinot Noir itself was 2003 which is just hitting the market in Australia now. There are only two and a half barriques made so it might be hard to come by and not cheap but it is worth seeking out. They are also producing small amounts of chardonnay and sparkling wine. The signs are looking very good indeed that New Zealand's purest expression of pinot noir may well come from this fledgling region.

Bell Hill Pinot Noir 2003 (\$120): Classic, outstanding pinot noir. It is expressive and clean and bright, as a young wine should be, but it's also got long legs of chalk and stone that pretty quickly get the hairs standing up on the back of your neck. There's a touch of undergrowth and a lot of tannin, and there's nothing wrong with either. This should be a slow evolver.

Drink: 2006-2014. 93 points.

(Article by David Brookes, wine review by Campbell Mattinson.)

Reviews

Balthazar of the Barossa

(www.balthazarbarossa.com)

Balthazar of the Barossa Barossa Valley Shiraz 2002 (\$60): It's a lovely wine but I doubt that it'll make old bones – it's already got a leathery underpinning to the curve of blackberried fruit, and there's a subtle sense that the acidity is just starting to poke out of the wine. I'm being harsh: it's soft and smooth, fine and ripe, its grooves of tannin impeccable. Drink: 2005-2009. 89 points.

Brad

(www.winebybrad.com.au)

Wine by Brad Margaret River Semillon Sauvignon Blanc 2005 (\$18) screwcap: Forget the cartoon label, this is seriously good. Hugely pungent, lemony, thistly and intense, with an estery fruit sweetness doing the job of acid a lot of favours. Top notch. Drink: 2005-2006. 91 points.

Wine by Brad Margaret River Cabernet Merlot 2002 (\$18) screwcap: Soft and slurpable and excellent quaffing, if not quite in the class of the white. Ribbons of chocolate and cocoa, an usher of blackcurry, hints of briar and an easy, smooth, gluggable drinkability. Nothing to complain about here. Drink: 2005-2007. 86 points.

Bannockburn

(www.bannockburnvineyards.com)

Bannockburn Geelong Chardonnay 2002 (\$47): An underlying wild power makes for exciting drinking. Mealy, wheaty, smoky and reduced, with coiled grapefruit, green bean and nectarine searing through the mouth. Biting, intense, excellent. Drink: 2005-2009. 93 points.

Bannockburn Geelong Shiraz 2002 (\$47): World class wine. It comes dry and long and herbal, pitted with drills of raspberry and black cherry and clove, and gives off whiffs of aniseed as it passes along your tongue. Lovely length. Fragrant and poised. Gary Farr is a master of this sort of wine, and the fragrant, stalky, long-hang 2002 vintage would have had him in his element. It tastes like it did – though, admittedly, you need to like a burst a tomato-leaf in your wine. Drink: 2008-2015. 92 points.

Bannockburn Serre Pinot Noir 2000 (\$120): It's got

the purest line of beetroot aroma you'll ever smell on a wine, very fragrant, very clean, very defined. The palate works up a fair bit of action, with compost and spice, fresh cherries and a racing acidity. The finish is long and tangy, and if you look you see ash and old wood and mushrooms. In time, it will develop fabulous complexity. Drink: 2008-2013. 92 points.

Bannockburn Stuart Pinot Noir 2001 (\$60): Warm, forward and farmy, like paying a visit to the local cow shed. This is not a wine for technocrats, but for less rigid lovers of pinot noir, this is beautiful. Perfumed, soft, juicy and dry, with forward, cherried fruit and a lovely, cuddly, cow-hide softness. Drink: 2005-2009. 90 points.

Buckshot Vineyard

(03 9578 8059)

Buckshot Vineyard Heathcote Shiraz 2003: Lovely Heathcote shiraz. Balanced and ripe and flavoursome, full of black fruit and toast, run with a slip of grainy vanillin and eminently settled and satisfying. There's a lisp of that sandy, clovey character so often seen in Heathcote reds – heightening the appeal. It's not a blockbuster, but it's quite lovely. Drink: 2005-2011. 88 points.

Buy 2002 Bordeaux?

The depth and wealth and widespread voluptuousness of the 2000 Bordeaux vintage was so strong that the vintages coming after were always likely to suffer, in the market anyway. The bad news about an historically great vintage is always that subsequent vintages will be difficult to sell, nalmost regardless of quality. The 1999 Barossa vintage is a classic case of this. Both 2001 and 2002 Bordeaux suffer from this, especially given that 2003 is a hot, rich year again. The truth is though that there is that there is some very good buying in 2001 and 2002 Bordeaux. Classicists would call them drinker's years.

But 2002 is not a great Bordeaux vintage, by a long way. The problem, as always, was the weather: the Bordeaux winter was dry, followed by a spring that brought erratic flowering. Erratic flowering means erratic grape bunches, and erratic grape bunches often lead to unbalanced wines. When you combine this with the fact that the Bordeaux summer never really got out of first gear, with long, cool, uncomplicated months that not only frustrated holiday-makers, but also made it very difficult to get the late-ripening grapes to, well, ripen. The Bordeaux problem was a

boon for Burgundy, both white and red, which lapped up the cool even temperatures and turned it into an incredible display of finesse.

Not so in Bordeaux – or so it seemed. Just when the vintage was about to be written off – September hit. Gone was the cool, the mild damp, the smell of bright wet leaves, and on came the sunshine, pure and strong. If you had a firm hand on your vineyards, the sun was a blessing, and helped make high quality wines. If your vineyard was in poor shape, and you hadn't thinned your crop levels, then the sun couldn't save you – too little, too late. September, in Bordeaux, is a long time to wait for warm sunshine. The sub-regions of Pauillac, St-Estephe, and Margaux fared the best.

A short burst of summer meant that grapes, in the end, ripened quickly – drinking the wines today, you see lovely, classical flavours that are drinking well young, and should improve medium term. Other than Latour, which seems the stand-out wine of the vintage – if your budget extends that far, mine certainly doesn't – the wines are generally medium-term agers, but will produce drinking joy through that time. They will not be good investment wines. And in general, they will not be good birth-year wines. For those who buy to drink, and to cellar medium term, there is though some lovely wine here. (Out of interest, a comparison with Bordeaux 2001: very similar flavours, and very similar wines, both the result of delayed summers. The 2001 summer though came slightly earlier than 2002, and has produced tighter wines of greater structure; many 2001s are now good buying on the secondary market).

Are the 2002s worth buying? Put it this way, they're not essential, and you could avoid them and perhaps not miss much. But there's some very decent buying here nonetheless, particularly under AU\$100.

Chateau Canon la Gaffeliere St Emilion 2002 (\$135): Ballooning, billowing, lively nose, a mash of pencil and cherry and raisons. The palate is thoroughly oaked, vanillin and creamy, with fleshy, supple, softened pencils and cherries and currants of excellent dimension. Runs gorgeously along the tongue. Ends with a woven, crafted, persistent finish. Drink: 2006-2014. 91 points.

Chateau Vieux Certan 2002 Pomerol (\$200): Bright for a Bordeaux, redcurrants and spice, mulberries and cedar and cherries. There's nothing uncertain about the palate either: it's swish, smooth, chocolatey and pure, with a long sure finish. Finesse rather than punch. The aftertaste is all smoking cigars. Give it time, and it should be lovely. Drink: 2010-2017. 91 points.

Chateaux Haut-Bages-Liberal 2002 Pauillac (\$65): Meaty, chunky, angular wine. Not a good result from the vintage. Bonox, silver foil, beefy, cigary flavour and tannins that aren't quite ripe. Traumatized flavour.

Drink: 2007-2012. 85 points.

Chateau Chasse Spleen 2002 (\$65): If you're looking for something smart and yet temptingly-priced from Bordeaux, this is the one. Liquid chocolate on liquid gravel, with sandy currants and dry tannins and booms of violet perfume. Assertively acidic but beautifully, and elegantly, structured, it's by no means a big wine but it's got classic Claret written all over it.

Drink: 2008-2015. 89 points.

Chateau Duhart-Milon-Rothschild 2002 Pauillac (\$74): Super value. Pungent, floral, long, structured and fine, with sure punches of blackcurrant and earth, backed by classic lead pencil and chocolate flavour.

Lovely mix of elegance and flavour. Drink: 2007-2016. 90 points.

Chateau Gruaud Larose 2002 St Julien (\$100): Lacks substance. Vegetal, soupy, ashen, struggling to cover a hole in the mid palate, studded with gravelly blackcurrant but then dry and harsh on the finish, as if it's itching to dry out completely. Drink: 2005-2010.

84 points.

Chateau Ducru Beaucaillou 2002 St Julien (\$195):

It's a very nice wine but simple, and a bit minted. The tannins though are beautifully settled and sweet, the flavours of black currants and pencils ripe and clean, and its eminent drinkability something to be admired. Extremely varietal. Lovely compact density of fruit and oak-cedar. Could rate far higher given time. Drink:

2010-2018. 89 points.

Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande 2002 (\$240): I really like this. It's big and muscular and full of barrel-ferment smoke, with a thick wedge of flavour mounting a wide-flanked attack upon your mouth.

The build is bigger than the wake, but the flavours of blackcurrant, smoke, cedar, violets and aniseed are dry, tannic and intimidating, yet full of flair. Sophisticated drama. Drink: 2012-2019. 93 points.

Chateau Lynch Bages 2002 (\$170): I find it hard to hide my disappointment. The bottle states that the alcohol is only 13 percent, but it provides both the first and last impression. In between there's a solid run of graphite, smoke, asparagus and fennel, and while the tannins are deliciously chalky/minerally, this wine lacks poise. Time will tone it down and better it, but bitterness will always lurk, and alcohol is always going to be an issue. Drink: 2010-2016. 88 points.

Chateau Lafite-Rothschild 2002 Pauillac (\$400): What a pretty wine. A gorgeous burst of floral fragrance, met by raisined, beetrooty, graphite-shot black fruit. It's expressive, it's mouthwatering, it asserts its class right out of the glass. The palate then takes that and runs with it. Cedar, pencils, exquisite tannins. Length and purity, Flases of tomato-like leaf but in a context of classic ripeness. Long and structured, and impeccable. Drink: 2009-2021. 94 points.

Chateau Haut-Brion 2002 Graves: It smells beautiful, and while the palate doesn't live up to the nose, wines that smell as good as this are rare. Perfumed, powerful, cedary and floral, stick your nose in this and think on the wonder of wine. Then taste on it. And while you're not exactly let down, there's something of a hardness here that doesn't quite fit, even though there's an engaging crunch of woodspice and graphite and mushrooms. The fruit is plummy, the tannins significant and super-tight. When it relaxes, it could easily be exceptional. Drink: 2012-2021. 92 points.

Chateau Mouton-Rothschild 2002 Pauillac (\$400): Too much oak, not enough finish. The tannins hit at the start of the back palate and then pull the wine up short, or shorter than it should go. Lots of coffee and vanilla and cedar, oak-flavours at odds with the mulberried, raspberried, redcurranty fruit. Ashen flecks add interest. There's a lot going on, but it lacks grace. Drink: 2012-2022. 89 points.

Chateau Margaux 2002 Margaux (\$399): Showing its alcohol but it's yet a lovely wine. Flashes and flushes of sawdust. Lots of bright, singing fruit. Graphite, sawdust, pencils, gravel, blackcurrant, the whole kit and kaboodle. Bright raspberry lifts and rotates through the mid-palate like a satellite of love, and there's a meaty/truffly/mushroomy dice to it too. A really good wine. Perfect density and pitch. Drink: 2009-2025. 94 points.

Chateau Latour 2002 Pauillac (\$600): This is a sensational wine. Licorice, violets, pencils, liquified blackberries and blackcurrants, lots of floral lift and yet substantial in every way. Distinctive. Firm. Long. Settled. Pure and expressive and minerally. Guts and glory. Profound and beautiful. Drink: 2013-2030. 96 points.

Buy 2003 Burgundy?

Some vital facts first: the great grapes of Burgundy are chardonnay and pinot noir, and while chardonnay can cope with all sorts of weather conditions, pinot noir is

a terrible master, full of demands and low on delivery. If pinot noir was your partner, you'd want a divorce, unless you have a particular bent for heartbreak. Principle among these demands is gentle weather, leaning heavily towards the cool. The 2003 vintage was not cool.

Indeed, it was the opposite. It was so hot that some people say you could have fried an egg on the grapes most days. A great indication of exactly how hot a wine season was, is the time that the grapes were generally picked – the earlier in the year, the hotter the year. In 2003, the bulk of the grapes were picked a full month earlier than they were in 2002. In grape-growing terms, this is a staggering difference. It's like arriving home at 3pm when you said you'd be out till midnight.

It's relevant to say here then that the 2002 was considered a great vintage, one of the classic Burgundy vintages of all time. 2003, being the exact opposite, does not auger well.

And, worse, it wasn't just heat that caused the problems – earlier in the growing season frost caused havoc, and once that was finished a lot of vineyards were also (adversely) affected by hail. Take the worst of this and blast them with months of hot sunshine, and you have a lot of exposed grapes that would have made better jam than wine. Particularly pinot noir: this is supposed to be delicate, ethereal, the most sophisticated of wines. Jam? *Quelle horreur!*

It turns out that it's not as bad as all that – or if it is, there is a silver lining. In general, white Burgundy has been hit hard, producing tough, ripe, fat wines, some of which are fine as early drinking fun, but generally have none of the finesse and fineness that they are famous for. There are exceptions – some of the whites of Fontaine Gagnard are very good – but 2003 white Burgundy, at least for those seeking classic flavours, is largely a disaster zone.

Red Burgundy from 2003 is more complicated. Again, largely, these are not classic wines, but they should not be written off: because of the geographical layout of Burgundy, and its steep slopes, often the vines in the lesser positions did better than the vines in the more famous positions – their flaws became an advantage. Village level Burgundy from 2003 is often very good, juicy, lively, packed with flavour and lovely to drink – don't cellar them, just enjoy them. From a pure drinking point of view then, 2003 red Burgundy has some relative bargains. Or if not bargains, then this: a lot of the 2003 village wines are better drinks than their 2002 counterparts (though they won't have the same longevity). The small number of 2003

Bourgogne reds I've tasted have also looked very good.

Premier Cru Burgundy – those vineyards that are almost great – has suffered badly, their relative exposure taking the full brunt of the heat. Grand Cru red Burgundy – the best of the best – has not produced classic wines, but has still (in general) managed to show exactly why these are considered to be classic sites.

2003 Grand Cru red Burgundy therefore has still got a lot to offer – a hardness, and harshness, of tannin being its main concern. There are jammy, biscuity flavours in these wines – most unusual, and unwanted, in red Burgundy – but in general quality terms, you have to give these wines credit. Grand Cru sites are not rated grand cru for nothing; whether these wines are up to the asking price is another matter.

The following wines were all tasted at various events run by The Prince Wine Store, and hosted by Burghound Allen Meadows. A feature on Allen Meadows will follow in the October edition. The Burgundy and Bordeaux reviews are by both David Brookes and Campbell Mattinson.

Raphet Lavaux St Jacques 1er Gevrey Chambertin (\$140): Here's a surprise packet. It has survived the ravages of the vintage so very well: floral, spicy, earthy and licoricey, with long, elegant, minerally length extending into the future. It's big and juicy and fruity, with scarf-like silkiness and a shelly finish. Excellent. Drink: 2005-2011. 91 points.

AF Gros Clos de la Fontaine 2002: OK, not a 2003, but what a terrific wine. Big, satiny, glossy, full of fruit progression and oomph and meaty impact. A deal of this perfumed power comes from oak, but the very fine tannin and very fine fruit gives every indication that it will handle the oak and swim majestically into maturity. Stunning Burgundy. Drink: 2010-2024. 94 points.

Esmonin Ruchottes-Chambertin Grand Cru 2003 (\$190): Here's the troubles of the vintage writ large. It's stewy, stinky, tannic and unbalanced, with hard oak and hard tannin on dry, porty fruit. The fruit is not jammy but it is also certainly not bright, with truffle-like characters providing the only real interest. It will be better with a few years under its belt, but it will always be a struggle. Drink: 2008-2014. 85 points.

Georges Roumier Chambolle Musigny 2003 (\$130): An early drinker, but it will be lovely while it lasts – this is a good wine. Flavours of baked earth, polished cedar, ripe plums and sap, but there's also a sashay of minerals and a silken mouthfeel that begs to be enjoyed. The tannins are probably a push too hard, but

the wine gets away with them. Drink: 2005-2010. 89 points.

Domaine de la Vougeraie Vougeot 2003: Fragrant as a baboon. Ash, toast, sour cherries, undergrowth, bitter chocolate and gravel. Lots of acidity and lots of powdery, bitter tannin. Perfect wine for those who like to walk on the wild side with their pinot – despite its complications it's a lovely wine, worth chewing over. Drink: 2006-2011. 89 points.

Louis Jadot Gevrey Chambertin 2003 (\$105): Raisiny and sweet, quite bizarre. Strong lipstick, musky perfumes, beetroot and rhubarb, with a toasty, cedary richness laid over the top. It's chewy, tannic and powdery in the mouth, the fruit showing clear baked characters. For all that, for sheer drinkability, it ain't bad. Drink: 2006-2011. 87 points.

Mongead-Mugneret Vosne Romanee 2003: Ashen, strong, glossy oak, perfumed fruit, enough balancing acidity and a minerally aftertaste. The mid-palate is plump and plummy and there's enough fruit exuberance to make for a fiercely attractive, if assertively oaked, early drinking wine. There's a semblance of silkiness here. Though there is a lot of tannin. Drink: 2005-2009. 88 points.

Georges Roumier Morey-St-Denis Clos de la Bissiere 1er 2003 (\$160): It's all over the place but I still liked drinking it. Not classic. Warm alcohol, warm plums, dry earth and dry tannin. Jammy baked fruit aflood through the palate, with an aldehydic finish. Chalky tannins are the real spur, the real enjoyment: think on the swoosh of that plummy flavour and the reach of that tannin, and you can easily enjoy this. Drink: 2007-2012. 87 points.

Domaine de la Vougeraie Vougeot Les Cras 1er 2003 (\$145): I like this. It's toasty, foresty and spicy, no doubt much of that from oak, but it works here. The fruit's raisiny and porty but juicy and earthy too, with a fine lace of firm tannin and an excellent sense of cedary, flavoursome structure. Again, not classical Burgundy, but of sound quality. Drink: 2008-2013. 89 points.

Louis Jadot Clos St Jacques 1er Gevrey Chambertin 2003 (\$265): This is where the 2003 Burgundy vintage really comes unstuck. This is a seriously hammered wine – it's so sweet and over-ripe that the fruit flavours taste like caramel, a gush of cedary, toasty oak unable to pull it all back into line. Jadot is a good producer, and Clos St Jacques a great vineyard, but not from this vintage. Drink: 2005-2008. 84 points.

Mongead-Mugneret Les Petit Monts 1er 2003: It's meaty and sappy and, *quell horreur!* minty, with quite a lack of fruit detail. Smoking cigars, plums, minerals, and quite a deal of musk-driven perfume, all suggestive of very, very ripe fruit. This is jammy, and oaky, and hedonistic, and on the last point rests the basis of the score. Drink: 2005-2010. 87 points.

Georges Roumier Bonnes Mares Grand Cru Chambolle-Musigny 2003 (\$400): **Big Burgundy.** What a whopper. And yet it's quite beautiful too: ripe, meaty, undergrowthy, inky and intense, with nudges of cedar and coffee, shortbread and dried earth. It's mouthfilling and it's persistent, with chalky interest piling through the aftertaste. In time, its class will be unveiled – this is too big now, but its tannin frame and sheer underlying beauty will serve it well. Drink: 2011-2020. 93 points.

Domaine de la Vougeraie Clos de Vougeot Grand Cru 2003 (\$245): Quite a lot of oak here – musk, cedar, brilliant and perfumed – but quite a bit of pure, expressive, clean fruit too. This is by no means classic Burgundy, but there's earthy interest and a stunning drive of minerals and truffles pushing out through the finish. Big, fragrant pinot, muscular and tender at once, with a taste of warm shortbread rising with time in the glass. Drink: 2011-2019. 92 points.

Louis Jadot Clos de Beze Grand Cru 2003 (\$490): Quite good but nowhere near the standard a Grand Cru wine should attain: it lacks brightness and definition, with flavours of baked cherries and sand mulling over tight, tannic stones and sweet hay. A lot better than the Jadot Clos St Jacques from the same vintage, but still a bit off the mark. Drink: 2008-2015. 89 points.

Maison Nicolas Potel Vosne-Romanee Les Petits-Mont 1er 2003 (\$95): Lots of concentration but lacking a little structure. Deeply coloured with ripe, jammy plum-like fruit on the nose, red cherry, blackcurrant, licorice, spicy oak and herbs. There is a raw edge to the fruit on the nose that seems to be a reoccurring theme with the '03 reds. In the mouth there are gobs of plummy fruit again with black cherry, undergrowth, spiced oak, licorice and thyme. Drink: 2007-2012. 87 points.

Bouchard Pere et Fils Vignes-de-l'Enfant-Jesus, 1er 2003: A lovely wine. Super expressive on the nose with ripe red and black fruits, spice, herbs, minerals, coffee with some game and licorice hints. These aromas appear again on the concentrated palate which combines both richness of fruit and a minerality of

structure with a lovely supple, lingering finish. Drink: 2008-2016. 91 points.

Esmonin Gevrey-Chambertin Lavaux-St-Jacques 1er 2003: I liked this wine straight off. It lies next door to Clos-St. Jacques, the finest premier cru in Gevrey, and usually lacks the ripeness of its esteemed neighbour – but that certainly hasn't been an issue in 2003. Sure there's a lot of ripe jammy fruit on the nose but it didn't seem to have the rawness apparent in some other 2003 wines I've tried. On the nose ripe plums and red fruits, wood spice, earth, minerals and licorice and a smattering of dried herbs. In the mouth it is supple with ripe red fruits and pure flavours but doesn't seem over the top and the minerality seems to etch more detail into the wine. It finishes with ripe tannins, lovely balance and a defined structure. Drink: 2006-2015. 89 points.

Gerard Raphet Gevrey-Chambertin Aux Combottes 1er 2003 (\$140): Surrounded by Grand Cru vineyards on three sides this wine offers up vibrant fruit on the nose with red cherries, raspberries, earth, violets and dried herbs. The fruit in the mouth is pure and sweet with red fruits, licorice, herbs with dots of minerals and the merest hint of game. A generous, elegant wine but still bursting with pure fruit and wrapped up in ripe tannins. Very nice. Drink: 2008-2015. 89 points.

By Farr

Gary Farr has finally kissed Bannockburn goodbye, and judging by the 2004 releases, he's done so at exactly the right time. These wines effectively replace Bannockburn in the Geelong pecking order – though I say this not having seen Bannockburn's 03s or 04s. I've been a fan of the By Farr wines from the start, my only concern being their price; they have been over-priced. These 04s are worth the money.

By Farr Chardonnay 2004 (\$55): This is by far the best chardonnay I have seen under this label. It's tight and intense, and yet remarkably reserved, with flavours of grapefruit and nuts and pears, and remarkably little oak. It has a bitter finish, which I like in this style of wine. It is long. It is very good. Drink: 2006-2010. 94 points.

By Farr Viognier 2004 (\$55): Very aromatic. A scorch of gunpowder, honeysuckle, rockmelon and figs, with a smoky intensity lingering on the finish. Really spiffing wine. Gorgeous. Drink: 2005-2007. 93 points.

By Farr Pinot Noir 2004 (\$55): There's that trademark Farr twigginess here but it's far in the background, a ripe stretch of fruit the wine's

dominating feature. I use the word stretch with care. This is lengthy and structured, with a dry, clean, mulchy finish and persistence to burn. Excellent. Drink: 2009-2015. 95 points.

By Farr Shiraz 2004 (\$55): A touch wild, a touch dry, lots of tannin and lots of dark, cherried, soy-like flavour. There's smoke, sourness, spiciness and pure, sweet fruit ripeness, like the wine is playing your tastebuds like a harp. This is A-class, cool-climate Australian shiraz. Drink: 2007-2015. 95 points.

Chateau Beaucastel

(www.beaucastel.com)

Chateau Beaucastel Chateauneuf du Pape 1999 (\$130): The warmth of the year has blown the spice largely off this wine, but it's yet a classic: flush with kirsch, animal, peanut shells, rose and strawberries, with a tar-like depth of flavour. It sings long and clear. It's a beautiful example of Beaucastel's divine world. Drink: 2008-2014. 93 points.

J.L Chave

J.L. Chave Hermitage Rouge 2001 (\$250): What a beautiful wine. Hermitage addicts rejoice. This has the lot: meaty, raspberried, smoky delicious, gorgeously honed tannins, terrific progression through the mouth and enough spice and lace and perfumed elegance to make you think that given time, this will develop into something quite special. This is not a table-thumping wine, but it is a superb one. Drink: 2010-2020. 95 points.

J.L. Chave Hermitage Rouge 1997 (\$150): The wines from the 1997 Hermitage vintage are not for long cellaring, and the 1997 Chave is a prime example. Drink it young. Cedary and herbal, with briary, smoky, cherried fruit, and smells and drinks beautifully, but dies quickly in the glass. Drink: 2003-2007. 88 points.

Coldstream Hills

(www.coldstreamhills.com.au)

Coldstream Hills Yarra Valley Reserve Chardonnay 2003 (\$44) screwcap: Certainly the best Coldstream chardonnay that I've tasted. Knocks you to the floor with the first sip. Powerful, concentrated, figgy certainty introduces a brassy, peachy, nervy palate of remarkable depth and length. The alcohol is too warm, but the strength and style overcomes it – this has only undergone 10 percent malolactic

fermentation, so there is a hint of butter-creaminess but that's all – it's a strong, sure, explosive burst of chardonnay fruit flavour. Drink: 2006-2010. 94 points.

Clarendon Hills

(www.clarendonhills.com.au)

Clarendon Hills Hickinbotham McLaren Vale Grenache 2003 (\$68): What a raw, polished, perfumed wine. Throw out your ideas of grenache, this wine re-writes them: it's thick, licoricey, salty, loaded with raspberry and lemon and cedar and spice. Very spicy, minerally wine. Quite a phenomenal experience. Drink: 2005-2012. 93 points.

Clarendon Hills Blewitt Springs McLaren Vale Grenache 2003 (\$82): There's a lot of blue, cedary oak here but it's still quite delicious – and high quality. Intensely raspberried, nutty fruit, spicy tannins, a great juicy softness and a feeling in the mouth like you're sucking on the richest cut of grenache in the world. Top tier. Drink: 2005-2012. 93 points.

Clarendon Hills Romas McLaren Vale Grenache 2003 (\$110): The alcohol leaps and dances on the nose but otherwise this is quite an exceptional wine. Full of exotic chalk-and-mineral like flavours and as with all the Clarendon Hills grenache wines, awash with thrilling raspberry and fennel. Very fine, very dry tannins. High class. Drink: 2006-2014. 92 points.

Clarendon Hills Hickinbotham McLaren Vale Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (\$110): Quite a gorgeous cabernet, if not quite in the top echelon. Ripe and raisiny with game and gravel in support, it licks up at you and then purrs through your mouth. Very good. Drink: 2008-2015. 88 points.

Clarendon Hills Brookman McLaren Vale Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (\$75): For such a raisiny wine this is quite acidic – and disjointed because of it – with a dusty sweetness the main show of flavour. It makes a play at elegance, but really it's quite an odd wine. Drink: 2006-2012. 86 points.

Clarendon Hills Brookman McLaren Vale Merlot 2003 (\$75): The least attractive of the 2003 Clarendon Hills releases, yet still a pretty smart wine. Don't go looking for ripe opulence though. Muddy mulberry and dried herbs with a flash of lead pencil; it is not good value. Drink: 2008-2013. 86 points.

Clarendon Hills Bakers Gully McLaren Vale Shiraz 2003 (\$68): Lick your lips and get into this – it's a seductive wet kiss of a wine. Gorgeous, meaty ripeness,

slaps of blackberried fruit, a juicy, raisiny, licorice swi-pe and excellent fruit-driven length. More please! Drink: 2005-2012. 93 points.

Clarendon Hills Moritz McLaren Vale Shiraz 2003 (\$82): It's a bit out of whack for now, but give it another couple of years and it should be really good. For now it's chocolatey and acidic and black cherried, with a real creaminess to its texture but a bitterness to its tannins that will require time to soften. Drink: 2007-2013. 87 points.

Clarendon Hills Brookman McLaren Vale Shiraz 2003 (\$110): Like sucking on a plank of cedar. Very oaky, but very polished. The palate is super-smooth and glycerol, with tastes of licorice and black cherries, kirsch and blackcurrant. There's an aftertaste of dry, warm sand, and it showcases the possibilities of McLaren Vale shiraz in a super-fine manner. Drink: 2005-2013. 93 points.

Clarendon Hills Hickinbotham McLaren Vale Shiraz 2003 (\$110): It's so raw and pulpy you can almost feel a spritz across your tongue. Related to that rawness is a strenuous drive of cedary oak, which despite its quality distracts from the rich deliciousness of the fruit itself – which is substantial. It sings long and in the end the fruit wins out, the oak dying back as the wine sits in your glass. It's all really quite beautiful, quite lipsmacking, quite easy to drink. Drink: 2005-2010. 90 points.

D'Arenberg

(www.darenberg.com.au)

D'Arenberg The Lucky Lizard Adelaide Hills Chardonnay 2004: I don't think the name D'Arenberg ever gets much of a mention when talk turns to chardonnay, but this has fast become a reliably good wine. It's sweet and peachy yet wild and yeasty too, with smart, cedary oak laying French kisses up and down its spine. When I call this wine elegant, I mean it. It is excellent. Drink: 2005-2008. 91 points.

D'Arenberg The Feral Fox Adelaide Hills Pinot Noir 2004: A solid release, packed with slippery soft fruit of the beetroot and black cherry variety, cut with a sappy, stalky complexity. It's got everything you want, including a lovely churn of dry tannin on the finish, but it just seems to lack high notes. My bet is that it would've looked better if it had been sealed under screwcap. Drink: 2005-2009. 86 points.

D'Arenberg McLaren Vale d'Arry's Original Shiraz Grenache 2003: Very sweet but really quite good. It's smooth and flavoursome and while the alcohol is high,

it's been worked into the wine so well that you barely notice it. Sweet chocolate, sweet tarry blackberry, a bend of raspberry and spice and then, finally, a warm finish. Damn fine drinking, and winemaking. Drink: 2005-2010. 88 points.

D'Arenberg McLaren Vale The Footbolt Shiraz 2003 (\$20): The Footbolt can be tremendous value but I'm not sure that it is this year. It's clumsy, warm, too tannic and lacking in real mid-palate fruit, a common trait of the vintage. I'm making it sound worse than what it is; it's still a good drink, and should the tannins come to relax, it will be better in 12 months. Drink: 2005-2008. 85 points.

D'Arenberg McLaren Vale The Custodian Grenache 2002 (\$20): It's rich and mouthfilling and loaded with sandy, raspberried spice, and while the kick in the finish is warm lovers of this label will be well 'appy 'ere. The coat of tannins that pull from the mid-point of the wine onwards are a treasure to behold, and there's the slightest slick of aniseed plumping up the core; it's arguably the best Custodian for a while. Drink: 2005-2010. 88 points.

D'Arenberg The High Trellis McLaren Vale Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (\$20): Dusty, chocolatey scents introduce a wine with slightly green tannins – something you don't see in too many wines from this maker. There's a perfumed, liqueurous sweetness through its core, but the finish doesn't quite carry the day. Drink: 2005-2010. 85 points.

Domaine Bruno Cevalier

Domaine Bruno Cevalier La Combe Brulee Vosne-Romanee 2002 (\$75): Fine tannins on a sheet of easy, sappy, smoky pinot fruit, as light as a heavy rose. Light but structured. Good even length and in a non-spoilt world you'd put this down as a successful Burgundy, but with the new world producing better wines than this at half the price, the price pressure is on. Ignoring value: this is a good, light, structured wine that should built weight and complexity in the bottle. Drink: 2007-2011. 86 points.

Grove Estate

(www.groveestate.com.au)

Grove Estate Partners Reserve Hilltops Cabernet Sauvignon 2001 (\$30): The Hilltops region has the ability to be a top-ranked cabernet region, and I'm happy to report that this wine is a clear illustration of that. Yes, it probably does have a ripple too much syrupy oak, but the clean ooze of blackcurrant is

outstanding, as is the class of the dust-sprinkled tannins. It's all quite exceptional. Drink: 2005-2014. 92 points.

Grove Estate Hilltops Zinfandel 2002 (\$17): It's super ripe but super sweet too – in fact, too much so. The flavours though are beautiful: sweet tobacco, raisins, old wood, the fruit sweetness absolutely to the fore. Worth watching – and if you like your reds sweet, this you'll love. Drink: 2005-2007. 85 points.

Jasper Hill

(www.jasperhill.com)

Jasper Hill Georgia's Paddock Heathcote Semillon 2004: Bang and bite, with honeysuckle and slate and dried herbs adding to the natural sweet perfume of cedary French oak. It's fruit-driven and long, but the alcohol jams out at you, leaving an afterburn. Delicious, but lacking refinement. Almost tastes viognier-esque. Drink: 2005-2007. 86 points.

Jasper Hill Cornella Vineyard Heathcote Grenache 2004: The first ever Jasper Hill grenache, and it's looking very good. Two things stand out: beautiful, fragrant, floral aromatics, just a joy to stick your nose in a glass of this. Then there are the tannins. Fine, long, lots and lots of them, maybe a bit of chalky powderiness to them but at no time do they overwhelm the palate – they start early in the palate and keep themselves alive throughout. In many ways it's my kind of wine. Licoricey, dry, tannic, floral, a hint of raspberry sweetness and an attractive bitterness on the finish. Fantastic addition to the range. Drink: 2005-2012. 91 points.

Jasper Hill Emily's Paddock Heathcote Shiraz Cabernet Franc 2004: The nose smells quite strongly of flytox, and truth be told it tastes of it too. This fact alone with polarise drinkers of this wine. It's high in alcohol (15%) but it carries it very well, with an elegance to the marry of fruit and tannin and a lovely dish of sweet, dry earth, coal and aniseed – and oak far in the background. There's spice and herb, sweetness and savouriness – there's a lot going on – and the tannin structure is superb. It should age tremendously. Though, if you can, try before you buy, because it does have polarising features. Drink: 2009-2016. 92 points.

Jasper Hill Georgia's Paddock Heathcote Nebbiolo 2004: I do think it's a good wine. It's warm and tannic and needs a good few hours in the decanter to show it's best, after which menthol and aniseed and a ground, coffeed earthiness pushes through. I wanted to like it more than I did though: its warmth distracts. Drink:

2008-2015. 88 points.

Jasper Hill Georgia's Paddock Heathcote Shiraz 2004: You can't help but admire this wine. It's absolutely fruit-driven, barely a lap of wood in sight. It's distinctive, and regional, with coal and aniseed and savoury fruit in among the pure density of it, and while there is the slightest trace of eucalypt you have to try really hard to taste it. It's got length and strength, and a full stretch of ripe, fine tannin. It is a very high quality wine, even with a big rip of alcohol. Drink: 2005-2015. 94 points.

Kalleske

(www.kalleske.com)

Kalleske Greenock Barossa Valley Shiraz 2004 (\$60): When I first stuck my nose in this I thought Troy had overdone the sweet, coffeed oak – but the palate well and truly reassured me. The oak does stick out a bit but it's perfumed and lively, and the fruit is so sure, fresh and dense that it'll soak it up and tone it in way before most people have opened their stash. This wine reminds a lot of the 2002 Penfolds RWT: it's full of boysenberry and licorice and cedar, with a fine sting of tannin and a redcurrant jelly-like brightness. Don't be mislead: this is every bit Barossan shiraz, concentrated and firm, and if you like the genre, it's essential. It's just alive and kicking, that's all. Drink: 2005-2016. 94 points.

Lanson

(www.lanson.fr)

Lanson Gold Label Brut 1996 (\$80): To some extent this is only nominally \$80 because you'll certainly find it cheaper at retail – and when you do, you'll have yourself a great bargain. This is top-notch champagne, long, thrilling, and distinguished, drilled with lemony acidity but rich too, with wheat and toast and straw. I was blown away by it. It's a high-acid, no malo, super-long wine, and while it's excellent now, it will develop gorgeously. Drink: 2005-2015. 95 points.

Leasingham

(www.hardys.com.au)

Leasingham Bin 7 Clare Valley Riesling 2004 (\$20) screwcap: Lovely even flavour and temper, offering spits of spice and lime, slate and rose. Impeccable. Powerful. Drink: 2008-2014. 91 points.

Leasingham Bastion Clare Valley Riesling 2004 (\$14): Amazing value. Intense rindy bitterness, fleshed

by lime and grapefruit. A big bang of flavour. Good length. Forward, but delicious. Drink: 2005-2009. 88 points.

Leasingham Bastion Clare Valley Shiraz Cabernet 2002 (\$14): Warm, brooding, black fruited and sound. Slip of vanillin, but as an afterthought. Fruit has a hard strength to it, but on pure bang-for-buck this delivers. Drink: 2004-2006. 85 points.

Leasingham Bastion Clare Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (\$14): Blocky, minty, firm, a bit unyielding and a bit too tannic, though there certainly is enough black fruit flavour. The shiraz-cabernet is better. Drink: 2005-2006. 83 points.

Leasingham Bin 61 Clare Valley Shiraz 2002 (\$23): Soft and leathery with a plummy heart, with old grainy mousy oak both helping and hindering the overall show. Minty. Struggles on the finish. Drink: 2005-2007. 85 points.

Leasingham Classic Clare Shiraz 2002 (\$45): Lots of good things in it yet noticeably rubbery and burnt. It's dense and curranty, riddled with cedary, peppery tannins and overlaid with silken, swarming, chocolatey oak. A lot of it is lovely. Drink: 2008-2014. 88 points.

Majella

(www.majella.com.au)

Majella Coonawarra Shiraz 2003 (\$35) screwcap: Majella shiraz is a solid performer, offering excellent quality and value each year. I see it again here: it takes a while to coax out of the glass but given time its flows cherries and blackberries and spice across your tongue, aided by the humblest serving of vanillin oak. Look hard and you taste licorice, but we have a lovely wine here again. Drink: 2005-2011. 88 points.

Majella Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (\$35) screwcap: Step up to the plate, this is a goodun'. Rounds of spice, rounds of vanilla, rounds of swish, pure, polished blackcurrant, with tannins that start of smooth and supple and build their grip with air, which seems to me to be no need for concern. I like it. I bought some. Drink: 2005-2014. 92 points.

Main Divide

(www.maindivide.com)

Main Divide Canterbury Pinot Noir 2003: Needs a couple of years but should then be lovely. Plump with spiced cherries and game, it jumps from the glass and delivers in the mouth too, even if the finish is gently metallic. Cedar and leaf matter bob here and there to

further the interest. and the drinkability factor is high. Drink: 2006-2010. 88 points.

Main Divide Canterbury Waipara Riesling 2004 screwcap: Wine doesn't come much more delicious. Grapey, floral, citric and semi-sweet, it glides across your tongue like a hovercraft, seducing as it moves. Lovely. Drink: 2005-2007. 89 points.

Occam's Razor

(www.jasperhill.com)

Occam's Razor Heathcote Shiraz 2004: No doubt this is the best Occam's shiraz to date. The spread of tannin is excellent, the mat of coal-like fruit, the Italianate savouriness and the sense of completeness to the finish. Earth, minerals, aniseed, it's all going on here. It's not what you would call a smooth wine, but it screams Heathcote, and those tannins are by no means ordinary. Drink: 2006-2013. 90 points.

Paradigm Hill

(www.paradigmhill.com.au)

Paradigm Hill Mornington Peninsula Riesling 2004 (\$24) screwcap: The style, the colour, the flavour: it's all pulling in the right direction. It tastes of talc and spring flowers and rose, with a flinty, steely finish ramping up the class. It carries well through the finish too. The only issue is that it lacks intensity, but boy this is an interesting Mornington Peninsula wine. Drink: 2005-2008. 86 points.

Paradigm Hill Mornington Peninsula Pinot Gris 2004 (\$35) screwcap: Fantastic gris. Rich, spicy, powerful, pear-like and assertive, with a long biting brassy finish. A good part of its power comes from alcohol, but the spice and punch and persistence carries the day. Really good. Drink: 2005-2006. 91 points.

Paradigm Hill Mornington Peninsula The Oracle Pinot Noir 2003 (\$39): Soft, round and fruity and yet slathered with cedary oak – it's like crowd-pleasing shiraz, as a pinot noir. That said, the fruit flavours themselves are every bit pinot: sour cherries, slips of beetroot, hints of mint and then an attractive, mineral finish. It's not going to make old bones, but that the vineyard has enormous potential seems obvious. Drink: 2005-2007. 86 points.

Paradigm Hill Mornington Peninsula VH-DOC Shiraz 2003 (\$35): It took me a long time to work out what I thought of this. At first I thought it was overtly white-peppered, and a bit thin, with a long, dry, mineral finish that added interest but not quite

enough to get it over the line. The more I looked though the more I noticed its excellent length, its taut dry palate, its low-level slide of black cherry and the absolute emphasis on structured savouriness. Give it another two or three years, and it could be very good. Drink: 2007-2009. 88 points.

Paxton

(www.paxtonvineyards.com)

Paxton McLaren Vale Chardonnay 2004 (\$27.50) screwcap: Fine, clean, juicy chardonnay with sweet-spicy oak perfectly judged. Lots of elegant, nectarine-like fruit and a good, bitter, grapefruit-like finish. It's a good wine. But the price is pushing it. Drink: 2005-2006. 86 points.

Paxton McLaren Vale AAA Shiraz Grenache 2004 (\$25) screwcap: Lots of alcohol, lots of chocolatey fruit, lots of blueberry and raspberry and earth and tannins that are smoother than a Gold Coast realtor. It delivers. Drink: 2005-2007. 87 points.

Penley Estate

(www.penley.com.au)

Penley Estate Coonawarra Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2002 (\$50): Terrific cabernet, and terrific for one major reason: balance. This is a wine in harmony, with flavours of dust and blackcurrant, grass and cedar, an edge of bitter chocolate stating its class. This is by no means a blockbuster; it's just a lovely, fine wine. Drink: 2008-2016. 93 points.

Penley Estate Special Select Coonawarra Shiraz 2002: It's got a soupy, cool-climate greenness that would make this wine easy to write off – if it weren't so mesmerising! Very swish cedary oak on spicy, ripe, cherried fruit, the finish pure and satisfying. It's a work of beauty. I heartily recommend it – it's a profound, pinot lover's shiraz. Drink: 2005-2012. 92 points.

Petaluma

(www.petaluma.com.au)

Petaluma Adelaide Hills Viognier 2004 (\$36): Delicious wine, big and powerful yet all delicacy too, stones and stone-fruits and spice, with a crunching crispness on the finish. The sulphur is high and this has seen oak, but the fruit well and truly drives over it. Slowly, slowly I'm starting understand the excitement over this vineyard. Drink: 2005-2007. 90 points.

Petaluma Adelaide Hills Shiraz 2003 (\$42): It's

clearly from a warm year – there are baked characters here, and the alcohol is way up at 15% – and running against that, the finish is noticeably bitter. Get over that though and there is still a good amount of red fruit brightness, helped by the lusciousness of viognier and the sweet-savouriness of top French oak. Indeed, I would happily buy and drink this, because it's got a lot of class, the biggest drawback really being that the finish isn't as lengthy as it should be; it's plump and soft and interesting, but not lengthy. Drink: 2006-2012. 89 points.

Petaluma Coonawarra 2002 (\$58): At the end of the day, it's just too weedy. It's stylish, beautifully (mildly) oaked, full of dust and currants, and has a fine set of tannins on it, with length that cannot be sneezed at. All up, there's a lot to like. All, except the flavour profile itself, which just isn't up to scratch. It will look good as a 10-15 year old, but it will never look good enough. Drink: 2010-2015. 87 points.

Rumball

(www.rumball.com.au)

Rumball Sparkling Merlot Fleurieu Cuvee M2: Quite a deal of complexity for a wine at this level. Dusty, earthy, savoury and vegetal, with a mulberried mid palate and then, unfortunately, a bitter aftertaste. Needs food. Drink: Now-2006. 82 points.

Rumball Sparkling Shiraz Coonawarra Cuvee SB17: Good, sound, soft drinking, brightened by sweet choc-raspberry-like flavour but kept savoury and smooth by an ooze of vanilla. Lots of easy fun to wrap your chops around. Drink: Now-2006. 84 points.

Rumball Sparkling Shiraz 1997: Rich and mouthfilling – what a huge step up on the base offerings. The liqueuring is heavy but the effect delicious, with a luscious display of blackberry jam and leather and chocolate, all pushing smoothly through to a super-smooth rip of tannin on the finish. It's sweet and full and serious, and very easy to admire. Drink: 2005-2010. 89 points.

Rumball Sparkling Shiraz 1998: What a knockout. A huge burst of smooth sweet fruit, raspberries and blackberries and chocolate and raw leather. Suck on it and feel the ripeness, the mouthfilling flavour, the sheer fruit generosity. This isn't savoury, this is sweet and full and luscious. It delivers. You'd have to look hard to find a sparkling shiraz that could beat it – even if the liqueuring is strenuous. Released next year. Drink: 2005-2012. 90 points.

Saltram

(www.saltram.com.au)

Saltram Metala Langhorne Creek Shiraz Cabernet 2003 (\$16): It's a very solid red, in sure form. Vanilla, tar, a melt of raisiny dark fruit and a good chunk of tannin. You can sink your teeth into it, and find something hearty to chew on. Good stuff. Drink: 2005-2007. 86 points.

Saltram No 1 Barossa Shiraz 2002 (\$60) screwcap: Lovely Barossan shiraz, though I just wonder if it's developing a little quicker than you might expect? The fruit's quite leathery, tarry, blackberried and sure, with toasty, coffeed oak certainly present but not in the stenching dimension of past years. It's quite juicy too, and highly drinkable, so much so that although it will cellar, there is no great need to. Spicy, peppery notes dance on the finish – the more I drank it, the more I certainly was impressed by it. Drink: 2005-2012. 92 points.

Sorrenberg

(www.sorrenberg.com)

Sorrenberg Beechworth Gamay 2004 (\$35): After the disastrous 2003 – it should not have been released – this is back in good form. Here it's easy to see why so many folks are loyal to it: it's sour and yet stylish, with cherry and rose and spice flavour whooshing through the mouth, before a sappy, beetrooty, slightly reductive after-taste. I like it. From this vintage, it deservedly shows why it's one of Australia's pre-eminent food wines. Drink: 2005-2009. 89 points.

Sorrenberg Beechworth Cabernet Sauvignon Cabernet Franc Merlot 2002 (\$38): Eminently stylish. Loaded with lead pencil and tomato leaf, with an excellent strike of curranty, raisiny flavour flowing through the palate. It will age very well. Looked hard, but could hardly see any oak. Drink: 2008-2013. 87 points.

St Hallett

(www.sthallett.com.au)

St Hallett Old Block Barossa Valley Shiraz 2002 (\$75): As time goes on I'm falling slightly out of love with the 2002 South Australian vintage – particularly above quaffer level – but this wine has got it just about perfect. It's ripe but herbal, and perhaps tinged with a little tinned corn, but the soft, easy flow of ripe fruit is quite delicious, and at the root of it there's liqueurous, black, plummy fruit that's full of brightness. There's

toasty, chocolatey oak but it's seamless and integrated, and while there's tannin here it teams beautifully in with the weight of fruit. If you wanted to show someone how good young Australian shiraz can taste, this would be an excellent place to take them. Drink: 2005-2015. 94 points.

St Hallett Gamekeeper's Reserve Shiraz Grenache 2004 (\$14) screwcap: Bargain wine. Absolute stand-out. Blessed with sure, soft, inviting aniseed and raspberry with a riff of slatey spice pumping up the interest. There's a lovely whack of chewy, powdery tannins too – outstanding value. Drink: 2005-2007. 89 points.

St Hallett Blackwell Barossa Shiraz 2002 (\$30): I suspect that this has come and gone from wine shops but this is my take on a recent tasting of it: beautiful soft black fruit, a sheer sheen of coffeed, toasty oak, lots of juicy acidity and a minor creep of both bright red fruit and grated coconut. Sheer Barossa, soft and black and lovely. Drink: 2005-2013. 92 points.

St Huberts

(www.beringerblass.com.au)

St Huberts Yarra Valley Cabernet Merlot 2003 (\$18): Varietal, dusty, quite acidic and a bit weird on the finish, as if the gentle custardy oak has curdled a fraction. I'm being harsh: this drinks well, and cleanly, and delivers well at its price. Drink: 2005-2007. 85 points.

St Huberts Yarra Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (\$24): This is a bit of a sleeper. It's very good. It's liqueurous and bold, yet still maintains St Huberts' traditional cabernet elegance. It's all blackcurrant and cedar and chocolate, and you look, but you can't find anything remotely green, even if it's not opulent or extravagant. The tannins, too, are very fine, and very ripe. It's the best since the 1998. Drink: 2006-2012. 89 points.

Tarrawarra

(www.tarrawarra.com.au)

Tarrawarra Estate Yarra Valley Chardonnay 2003 (\$42) screwcap: Superb chardonnay – just delicious. Complex, yeasty, mealy nose but then the widest smile of a palate, all nectarine and pear and bright, estery cedar. You cannot dislike this wine. It trembles with deliciousness, and it lingers. Drink: 2005-2010. 93 points.

Tarrington

You're going to hear me bang on a lot about Tarrington Vineyards in coming years – and an extended feature is still on the way. The reason is that Tarrington's chardonnay is now in my top five Australian chardonnay list (Giaconda, Leeuwin, Savatere, Bindi and Tarrington, with Bannockburn possibly on the slip, By Farr and Toolangi fast on the rise, and apologies to recent vintages of Yattarna, Curly Flat, Epis, Cullen and Voyager). I rank it that highly. The 2003 Cuvee Emilie pinot noir has thoroughly convinced me on the capability of Tarrington pinot too. These are serious wines, the most serious of world wines entirely in thier sights.

Tarrington Vineyards is the love affair of Tamara Irish and Dianne Nagorcka. It sits in the cool Henty region of south-west Victoria, near Hamilton, and the attention to detail, in a creative way, could not be more precise.

The property was planted with vines in 1993, the vines planted extremely close, at around 8000 vines per hectare. Ever since they have been grown unirrigated, and deliberately restricted to a miniscule yield of less than one tonne per acre. Sheep graze the vineyard, helping to naturally fertiliser the soil. Extra trees – cypress, olive, Australian natives – have been planted, to help promote a diverse insect and bird life on the property. The soil has never been ploughed, to leave natural populations of funghi, worms and frog life undisturbed. This is farming as an act of reverence.

In the winery itself, everything is done by hand – everything. Machinery has been deliberately avoided – even cooling equipment is a no-go area, so that “fermentations occur at their own pace, reflections of the seasons and the microbial terroir.” Naturally, the wines are not clarified, or filtered, and are (believe it or not) even bottled by hand. Tarrington Vineyards is the extreme opposite of mass production wine. It is extreme quality, made extremely natural, or it is nothing at all.

In their own words, “The wines of Tarrington are not wines for the hedonist or the theorist. They are grown by respectful, cautious and careful keepers of this place on earth, made in tiny quantities that render every vine and every bottle an intimate associate, if not a tiny expression of their creative mistresses.” Symphonies, and songs, have even been known to be allocated to each wine made at Tarrington – but nothing about the extremity of the Tarrington approach ever promised to be sane.

It's the kind of approach, and outlook on life, which always sounds admirable – but can often end, from a pure wine quality perspective, in relative disaster. This

is not the case with Tarrington. As per the reviews below, these three wines are all outstanding. All three would stand proud in any company.

Tarrington Chardonnay 2004: Before I say anything about this wine, if you're thinking of buying it, please do not open it for at least four years. You're almost wasting your money if you do – your only chance of salvation, if you can't resist, is to decant it for at least six hours. For a chardonnay. The reason is that it's crunchingly acidic, with a huge swerve of crushed lemons bursting through the palate. The drama of it is impressive. But it has more: pears, nectarines, almonds and figs, all – except perhaps for the pears – dashing here and there in the background. All these sensation remain in the mouth long after you've swallowed. It is an amazingly pure wine, concentrated, lengthy wine, in need of a good deal of time. Drink: 2009-2017. 96 points.

Tarrington Cuvee Emilie Pinot Noir 2003 (\$62CD): I could say many things about this wine but at the end of the day I can sum it all up quite quickly: this is probably the best young Australian pinot noir I have come across. It is dramatically fragrant, but it is not confected. It is long, and juicy, and tannic, but it is perfectly balanced. It has cedar and autumn leaves, toast and black cherry, but it is neither fruity, nor oak-dominated. It is what it is. It is the meeting of Tarrington earth and pinot noir grapes. It is outstanding. It is at least Premier Cru standard, and upper echelon premier cru at that. Drink: 2009-2016. 95 points.

Tarrington Pinot Noir 2004 (\$47): It's tempting to list the flavour profile here, because there's certainly a bit going on: mulch, boysenberries, violets and sap, all built on an anvil of tannin-etched black cherry. These Tarrington wines though aren't really parrying at the fruit show, so it's best to go this way: this is balanced and powerful and sure, is full of dry wit and wet acidity, and I have no doubt that it will mature well. Drink: 2009-2014. 94 points.

Artemisia Pinot Noir 2004: Made as an entry-level Tarrington – not made with Tarrington's estate fruit, but with grapes grown specifically for Tarrington's use – and a perfect insight into why the higher wines are so good; this would be many producer's top wine. Complex, light, varietal, lashed with sour cherry and sap, and then dry and reaching on the finish. Drink: 2006-2010. 89 points.

Tamara Irish of Tarrington Vineyards has also just released two extraordinary new wines under her De Ireys label. These wines, beautifully packaged and made, are \$95 per bottle, a price Tamara herself

admits has been set to ensure that she gets to keep a lot of the wine for herself: "They are made in such amounts so that if no one else should care for them, then I shall have an abundant but not excessive personal, indulgent supply. They are made by me, for me, of me and mine." They are both quite something to experience, and should both be decanted.

De Ireys Chardonnay 2004 (\$95): Some wines are about fruit, some wines are about structure, and then some wines are just themselves. I suspect that this wine falls into the latter category. There's a lot of acid here, quite a deal of bitterness, a gentle edge of toast and a handsome croon of minerals and nectarine. It's a fantastic wine, just superb. Drink: 2008-2014. 95 points.

De Ireys Shiraz 2004 (\$95): I didn't cope with this at first. It was too bitter, too rubbery, too tight, too much. I just didn't know what to make of it. I'd had it decanting for an hour or so, and got so worried about it that I opened another bottle of something else and decanted it too. The things you do. The second bottle was just about ready to rip when I turned back to this wine: and I started to see what it was trying to say. It was like reading a book: the first few pages were difficult, but then something spoke to me – and before long, I was hooked. Or fascinated. Or just plain interested in what it might show me next. The fascination does not come from faults, though it's possible that it's a bit reductive. The wine is clean. But wild. Cherries and mulch and minerals, and other things besides. It needs time in the bottle, and then time in the decanter. You're wasting your dosh if you don't do both. Drink: 2009-2016. 93 points.

Tim Adams

(www.timadamswines.com.au)

Tim Adams Clare Valley Aberfeldy Shiraz 2003 (\$50) screwcap: I'm a long-term fan of Aberfeldy shiraz, which is why this release surprised me so much. I didn't like it. It's a swamp of coffeed, chocolatey, vanillin oak, none of which is terribly unexpected in an Aberfeldy – there's usually a swoon of bright beautiful fruit to support it. Here there is fruit, all cherry and five-spice, but nowhere near what is required to prop up the mass of oak. This wine spends 12 months in one-year-old American oak, before then being transported to brand new American oak for a further 11 months – effectively being double-oaked. In an increasingly more oak-sensitive consumer environment, that's a process that might require some contemplation – though it's probably just the vintage. Drink: 2005-2008. 85 points.

Tim Adams The Fergus (Grenache, Shiraz, Cabernet

Franc) 2004 (\$24) screwcap: Big, warm, gutsy wine, full of tar, cherry, and a blackberried fruit richness, and a backing of vanillin. It's a good, safe, reliable wine, if a touch too warm. Drink: 2005-2008. 86 points.

Tim Adams Clare Valley Semillon 2004 (\$22) screwcap: This is quite brilliant. It's like a half-way house between Hunter Valley and Margaret River semillon, with the lemony delicacy of one and the racy, dusty, grassy style of the other. It's fresh and crisp but interesting too, with lovely tangy length. It is a very good wine. Drink: 2005-2008. 90 points.

Torbreck

(www.torbreck.com)

Torbreck Barossa Valley Woodcutter's Semillon 2004 screwcap: Good, rich, pure wine that flabs out through the mid-palate and runs out of puff on the finish. Toasty, brassy, musky. OK. Drink: 2005-2006. 83 points.

Torbreck Barossa Valley The Steading Grenache Mataro Shiraz 2003: It's got the Torbeck factor – that smell and taste you get in so few reds, but so often find under this label. It's sweet as blackcurrant, full as cream, loaded with licorice and rubbed with a jubey raspberry flavour the swims over the top of variety and just plain seduces. There's a bit of earthen spice here too, and the tannins are quite perfect. Drink: 2005-2010. 90 points.

Torbreck Barossa Valley The Factor Shiraz 2003: Look, there's a bit of alcohol heat here but it's otherwise an outstanding wine. The fruit's black and deep and sound, but there's a brightness to it too, a life, a blueberried rush to the mound of sweet, meaty, spicy, cedary deliciousness. This is quite awesome. The tannins are long and fine and mature, the flavours bold and attractive, the toasty, tar-like aftertaste enough to get red wine lovers anywhere all fired up. If it wasn't for the spike of alcohol, it would be king. Drink: 2005-2014. 92 points.

Yalumba

(www.yalumba.com)

Yalumba Y Series Viognier 2005 (\$12) screwcap: What a great wine land Australia is – viognier as good as this, served as crisp as this, under screwcap and over performing. Spicy, stonefruity, absolutely varietal and punchy and powerful on the finish. Enormous value. Drink: 2005-2006. 89 points.

Yalumba Y Series Shiraz Viognier 2004 (\$12): This is an excellent new release, every bit in the soft, perfumed, savoury mould and at the price, remarkably delicious. Minerally, smooth, juicy and good. Drink: 2005-2006. 86 points.

Tapanappa

Brian Croser's (and partners) new wine company

And so the first of the wines arrives – the first Tapanappa. This is Brian Croser's post-Petaluma baby, though this time around he has Jean-Michel Cazes (of Bordeaux's Lynch Bages) and Arnould d'Hautefeuille (of Champagne Bollinger) as business partners. With names like that, and the resources they infer, this is expected to be a powerhouse production in the making.

A powerhouse production aimed at the quality end of the market – or the expensive end, depending on your view. What the project has to play with – for now – is a 30 year old vineyard in Wrattobully, 20 kilometres north of Coonawarra. This vineyard is all terra rossa soil over a ledge of limestone, with limestone caves directly beneath the vines. 800,000 year old – even older than Moby Dick – whalebones have been found in those caves, a fair indication that we're looking at an extremely old landscape here. This is an ocean's shortline that has solidified into limestone and then itself worn down into red soil. All indications are that this is a soil and a climate made to grow cabernet – a belief Brian Croser has had since roughly 1980.

The Whalebone Vineyard itself is eight hectares in size, and until recently was known as Koppamurra – the name whalebone certainly is more evocative. Wrattobully is gently warmer than Coonawarra, but still has the ocean's moderating breezes – and this vineyard is protected from the real force of the wind. Cabernet should ripen consistently, and with new trellising systems fast put in place – bringing the yield down to a miniscule 3 tonne/hectare – the results from here on in should be fascinating.

This is not just another start-up: the vineyard is in its prime, fully mature and ready to rock; the yields have been reduced; and the grapes are now harvested by hand. It is all also being controlled by senior figures of world wine. There is a high likelihood that Tapanappa will, in time, release other wines from other regions – but for now, Wrattobully is the flagship, the flagbearer, the leader of this grand new wine ship.

Apart from the wines themselves, which will demand their own attention, there is another interest at play: it's

been nearly 30 years since Brian Croser last started a wine company. In a vastly changed Australian wine landscape, can he once again create a wine company of genuine relevancy?

Tapanappa Whalebone Vineyard Cabernet Shiraz 2003 (\$70): Croser's team took over the vineyard in 2002, in time to get it ready for the 2003 vintage. It was a hot year, 20 percent hotter than the long-term average, but then autumn came early, and stuck. This wine is a blend of 70% cabernet sauvignon, 20% shiraz and 10% cabernet franc. The grapes were destemmed, but 60% whole berries were used in the ferment, which took place in one tonne fermenters. Maturation (and malolactic fermentation, on full lees) took place in all new French oak. The end wine has an alcohol reading of 14.5%, is bottled with a cork seal, and while it was lightly clarified, it was not filtered. 950 cases were made.

The review: Stick your nose in it, and it's deep and heady and intoxicating – and inviting. A complex play of cedar and malt, backed by brooding, sweet, ripe, briary fruit. It smells every bit like a high class cabernet shiraz, that leafy, powerful interest and that spicy, super seduction running free here. It's easy to take your time over the nose; it smells good.

Unfortunately these rampant positives don't continue. When you eventually drink of it, you quickly feel a little short-changed, because the palate is nowhere near as good as the nose. The palate is stented and strikingly vanillin, a creaming wave of oak powering over the fruit, so that the finish is all oak, with hardly any fruit to speak of there. This bottle was not corked: it smelled great, and the mid palate is strong and round and fruity. The problem is that the oak overwhelms the fruit, not only winning out in the end but making for a confused finish. The tannins, too, are clumsy. In time, some of these issues will resolve, and good fruit has an amazing ability to drink up oak, given time. This wine, from this first vintage though, is not up to the price; expect future releases to be better. Drink: 2007-2014. 88 points.

www.tapanappawines.com.au