

# The pull of the River



Margaret River's world-class Bordeaux blends don't come cheap, but offer delightful finesse and quenching freshness, says Ch'ng Poh Tiong. Author of the annual *Margaret River Report*, he explains his attraction to the region and examines the issue of sub-regionality



Ch'ng Poh Tiong

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MY FIRST TRIP to Margaret River was at the end of the 1970s. At that time my parents were considering emigrating to Australia and they had a house in Lesmurdie, 20km east of Perth. After visiting them there, I took off to Margaret River – this was in an era when there was a mere handful of wineries.

I met mother and daughter winemakers Di and Vanya Cullen, top grower Erl Happ and, although I cannot be absolutely certain of it, Tom Cullity, founder of Vasse Felix. Down the years I've revisited Margaret River and, just as importantly, vigneron

from that part of Western Australia have passed through Singapore. The two-way traffic has allowed me to stay in touch with the people and their wines.

Then, two years ago, I had dinner with the man credited with identifying Margaret River as a cooler climate for growing fine wine. Dr John Gladstones – also a world authority on lupins – had in 1965 published a report on the potential for fine wine in southwestern Australia. At the Perth restaurant, he expanded on his original vision: 'It was little more than a gut feeling at first. Part of the reason was the presence of well-drained ironstone gravel soils carrying healthy dominant marri [trees], which had long been regarded in Western Australia as an ➤

**Below: Credaro Family Estate owns eight vineyards spread across Margaret River's unofficial sub-regions**

## Margaret River at a glance

**Location** 280km south of Perth, Australia

**Area** 3,000km<sup>2</sup>

**Area under vine** 5,500ha

**Producers** 120, most boutique size, crushing 30,000-70,000hl

**Importance** The region contributes only 3% of Australia's wine grapes, but commands 20% of the premium market

**Grapes** Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Shiraz, Merlot, Chenin Blanc and Verdelho

**Sub-regions** None.

In 1999, Dr John Gladstones suggested six:

Yallingup, Carburnup, Wilyabrup, Treeton, Wallcliffe, Karridale

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indication of prime vineyard soils. Memories also came back of summer stone fruits at Augusta, produced locally on an orchard at Alexandra Bridge [near Karridale]. If stone fruits, why not grapes?

We are too close to history to fully appreciate the significance of Gladstones' seminal work (*The Climate and Soils of South-Western Australia in Relation to Vine Growing*). For me, his report is equivalent to the Dutch draining the marshes of the Médoc in the 17th century; the Cistercian monks at Clos de Vougeot mapping the *lieux-dits* of their legendary vineyard in the Côte d'Or; or the 1855 Classification of the wines of the Médoc specifically, and of Bordeaux generally.

## Why Margaret River?

Some 15 years ago, I decided to concentrate on the wines of Bordeaux and, accordingly, in 2000 I launched the *Chinese Bordeaux Guide*. I don't recall the exact year of my first visit to the area, but since 1999 I have visited Bordeaux four or five times annually in connection with my guide. Then, in late 2012, I added another focus to my wine career. It seemed logical to stay with Cabernet blends. This does not mean that I don't admire the other wines of the world – merely that, professionally, it helps me to maintain an eagle-eyed focus.

If I needed other compelling reasons to home in on Margaret River, they weren't hard to find. Singapore to Perth is only about a five-hour flight,

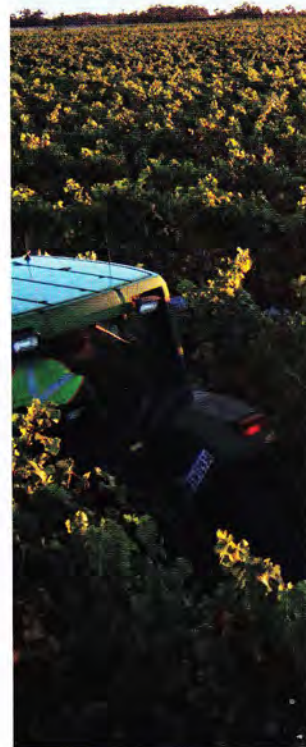
**Below: Dr Tom Cullity with the first Riesling at his property Vasse Felix, the region's founding commercial vineyard**



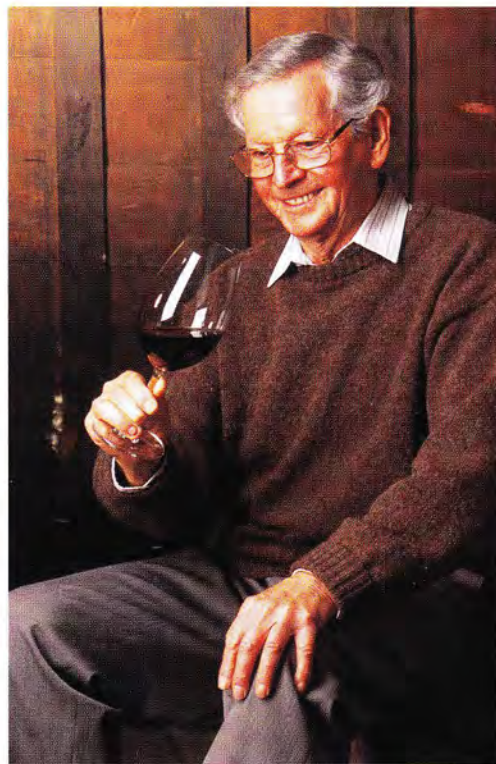
followed by a three-hour drive to Margaret River (and there is no time difference between Western Australia and Singapore). Then there's the spectacular scenery of vineyards, native bush, majestic karri trees, breathtaking coastline and good coffee. Most Margaret River wineries are owner-managed – the same people often also making or directing the wines. There's a nice rhythm about the place and I like the fact that, in general, the people are not full of themselves.

Don't for a moment, however, doubt their seriousness of purpose. 'Many pioneers of the Australian wine industry were doctors, and the tradition is particularly strong in Margaret River, where the founding vineyards – Vasse Felix, Cullen and Moss Wood – were all established by doctors,' says Peter Thompson, a cardiologist and university professor, founder of Thompson Estate and former co-owner of Pierro Vineyards. 'I had a close relationship with each of their founders. Dr Tom Cullity [of Vasse Felix] was a cardiologist and one of my teachers. I worked with Dr Kevin Cullen, and was in the same class in school as Dr Bill Pannell [of Moss Wood].'

He continues: 'What drove my involvement in the wine industry was similar to what drove these medical people, I imagine. Both professions require a basic knowledge of biochemistry and microbiology, an obsessive attention to detail and a striving to improve. Making premium wine presents similar challenges, but encourages a creative streak and an element of risk-taking which would be unacceptable in medicine.'







Above: Dr John Gladstones drew international attention to the region's favourable conditions for fine-wine production in 1965

Left: harvesting at dawn – before the heat of the day affects both workers and the grapes – at Vasse Felix

I adore wines that have a bristling competition between fruit, freshness and structure. On the other hand, big wines, big alcohol, a big piece of meat – anything big for its own sake – is as tiresome as a person in love with himself.

Mercifully, Margaret River wines are nothing like that. Instead, like most of the people who produce them, they strive for elegance, finesse and quenching freshness. Most people here believe that shape is more important than size, persistence more precious than power, and go for balance rather than blast. As for price competitiveness between Margaret River and other Australian Cabernet blends, while Margaret River versions are hard to come by at the lower end of the price spectrum, the top and very good wines are no more expensive than the likes of Penfolds' multi-regional Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon, Wolf Blass South Australia Black Label, Penfolds' Bin 169 Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon, and other offerings from Coonawarra.

One man who has long possessed a deep understanding of Margaret River is the veteran winemaker Bob Cartwright, who between 1978 and 2005 rolled out 28 vintages at Leeuwin Estate. In spite of his expertise, when asked to enumerate the foremost criteria for making great Bordeaux blends, the elder statesman of Margaret River defers to elements beyond his control.

'The most important, without doubt, is the climate. Margaret River was selected by Gladstones, who came to the conclusion that what we have here

– climate, temperatures and proximity to the ocean – is very close to Bordeaux,' he says. 'The next condition is the soil. We have a lot of red gravelly loam over clay, which provides good drainage. At the same time, the clay helps keep the moisture when that's needed.'

Cartwright believes clones to be the third important criterion. In this regard, the two dominant Cabernet Sauvignon clones are the Houghton clone (from the Swan Valley winery that was established in 1836) and Clone 126 from the Barossa Valley. According to Cartwright, both are quite similar, but with the Houghton clone exhibiting perhaps a more vegetal characteristic.

Fortunately for Margaret River, Cartwright continues to work as a consultant (as engaged with the vineyards as he is in the winemaking), including as chief winemaker at Thompson Estate.

### Drilling down

For some time now, some winegrowers have not been content to refer to their Cabernet blends as being merely from Margaret River. They also proudly pinpoint in which sub-region their wines are grown. The subject is an emotive one. Some quarters are concerned that greater specificity may confuse, rather than help, consumers make informed choices. But is this warranted?

Bordeaux provides a clue to the answer. While journalists, sommeliers and wine professionals are, for example, keen to know whether the wine >

*'Like most of the people who produce them, Margaret River wines strive for elegance, finesse and quenching freshness'*



comes from St-Estèphe, Pauillac, St-Julien or Margaux, most consumers are only really interested that what they are putting to their lips is Château Cos d'Estournel, Pichon-Baron, Léoville-Barton or Brane-Cantenac.

In a sense, it was inevitable that the subject of sub-regionality would rear its head above the fermenting mass. I daresay it's symptomatic of Margaret River because most wineries are owned by individuals rather than big corporations. The latter tend to prefer 'hiding' behind an established brand or brands, and would rather the consumer trust the brand rather than ask awkward questions, such as where the wine comes from, what was the yield, and how old are the vines.

The same is true of the fashion industry, where producers of branded goods such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton don't bother to go into details of their production, relying instead on famous faces to sell their products. And if the truth be known, most of the buyers don't care, either.

Wines that proudly proclaim their 'Appellation Sub-Regional Contrôlée' are rather similar to bespoke goods. They appeal to a particular species of wine lover – those who aspire to be special.

For the moment, the received – and, to some extent, perpetuated – wisdom is that Wilyabrup is in pole position for best sub-region. Time may yet confirm this otherwise unofficial standing, but while it's not altogether a bad idea to be slightly fixated on Wilyabrup, my preferred viewpoint is to keep an entirely open mind.

## Sub-regions in the glass

On the first weekend of May 2013, the Cullen, Moss Wood, Woodlands and Fraser Gallop wineries invited fellow producers to submit their wares for a sub-regional tasting of wines made from only Wilyabrup fruit of the 2011, 2012 and 2013 vintages. The latest exercise was a revival of the Margaret River Sub-regional Tasting organised by Cullen and Moss Wood back in 1999.

One of the most passionate defenders of Margaret River sub-regionality is also a fervent champion of biodynamic farming. 'The wines were so consistent and wonderful,' says Vanya Cullen of the Wilyabrup tasting. 'It is the land which sings the most beautiful song in the glass, and Wilyabrup is the most beautiful song. However, as with everything, there are different songs and tastes. I liken it to the metaphor that mangoes on a mango tree are like different saints – similarly, so are the differences in expression from the land in wine. Wilyabrup is my connection. John Gladstones, a guest of the tasting, described it as being the sweet spot for Cabernet Sauvignon in Margaret River.'

Cullen goes out of her way to pinpoint that her praise for Wilyabrup is because of her connection to it. If Wilyabrup has the most beautiful song, she is also willing to admit that there are other equally worthy, if different, melodies. Her wines are stunning, not only because of the location of her vineyards, but also her accomplished skills as a winemaker. It will be difficult for someone to make the universal claim that so long as the vineyard is located in Wilyabrup, the wine will automatically be wonderful.



One of Woodlands' two vineyards in the Wilyabrup Valley – generally considered to be the best of Margaret River's unofficial sub-regions

The commune of Margaux provides an instructive example. Château Pontac-Lynch is barely a kilometre south of Château Margaux. Yet no one would suggest that just because the cru bourgeois is in the same commune and so close to the first growth, it produces wine of equivalent stature.

Matthew Credaro's family emigrated from northern Italy and settled in Margaret River in 1922, and now owns eight vineyards spread across the unofficial sub-regions. 'Areas of viticultural differences occur in Margaret River,' Credaro explains. 'Sub-regionality within the Margaret River GI (Geographical Indicator) is contentious and great care needs to be taken not to succumb to marketing and profit-driven ideals or exclusivity. At present, there are no defined boundaries agreed upon or legally recognised either by the wine industry or the Australian government.'

And Credaro adds: 'To suggest that quality is simply acquired by the purchase of land in a desirable area is just not true, and there are examples of both basic wine and iconic Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot wines from many of the different unratified sub-areas within Margaret River. It is great viticulture, winemaking and an understanding of the terroir, and working within it, that enables great wines to be produced.'

There's so much common sense in Credaro's thinking that it is hard to refute it. Yet, at the same time, Cullen also has her point. I for one will be staying impartial – at least for the time being. **D**

*Ch'ng Poh Tiong is a Decanter columnist as well as publisher of the Singapore Wine Review and annual Margaret River Report, available via [www.vinovideos.com](http://www.vinovideos.com)*

## Up-and-coming wines

- Amelia Park, Cabernet Merlot
- Brookland Valley, Cabernet-Merlot
- Cowaramup Wines, Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon
- Forester Estate, Cabernet-Merlot
- Hay Shed Hill, Cabernet Sauvignon
- Howard Park, Leston Cabernet Sauvignon
- John George, Cabernet Sauvignon
- Lenton Brae, Cabernet-Merlot
- Rosily Vineyard, Cabernet Sauvignon
- Streicker, Ironstone Block Old-Vine Cabernet
- Umamu Estate, Cabernet-Merlot

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## 2010 vintage report and top wines

I blind-tasted 55 wines from the 2010 vintage for my inaugural *Margaret River Report*. Regarding the weather that year, spring was warm, with an average rainfall resulting in ideal conditions for flowering and fruit set. Warm to hot conditions continued through the growing season, and the cooler weather in autumn meant the grapes ripened gradually. In the process, not only were acidity and freshness preserved, but the drawn-out effect allowed the fruit to accumulate layers of dazzling complexity, too. 2010 is an outstanding vintage.



### **Credaro Family Estate, Cabernet Sauvignon 2010**

19/20pts (96/100pts)

N/A UK [www.credarowines.com.au](http://www.credarowines.com.au)

Complex nose of violets, cassis, raspberries and blueberries. The tannins are equally unrelentingly rich, ripe, intense and suave. A wine of great structure, freshness and unafraid fruit that is contoured, controlled and full of precision. **Drink** 2015–2040 **Alcohol** 13%

### **Cullen Wines, Diana Madeline 2010**

18.5 (95) £68 widely available via UK agent Liberty Wines

Elegant blueberry, mulberry, minerally fruit of great intensity and length. Finesse and remarkable freshness. Medium-bodied,

proving that a great wine doesn't have to be in-your-face. **Drink** 2015–2040 **Alc** 13%



### **Leeuwin Estate, Art Series**

**Cabernet Sauvignon 2010** 18.5 (95)

£35–£39 widely available via UK

agent **Domaine Direct**

Lively, lifted cherry fruit. Medium body with impressive intensity and persistence. Vivacious, feminine and silky-smooth, yet also with loads of stamina and energy.

**Drink** 2015–2035 **Alc** 14%



### **Thompson Estate, Andrea Reserve Cabernet Merlot 2010**

18.5 (95)

N/A UK [www.thompsonestate.com](http://www.thompsonestate.com)

Intense blue and black fruits. Rich tannins that are also very fresh. The oak and structure are nicely handled and, together with the sustained intensity of fruit, expertly balanced. Medium-plus body. **Drink** 2015–2035 **Alc** 14%

### **McHenry Hohnen, Rolling Stone 2010**

18 (93) £19.99 Ann et Vin, Arth Wine, General Wine Co,

Noel Young Wines, North & South Wines, Oz

Wines, The Vineyard Dorking

Capsicums, blueberries and liquorice.

Striking intensity and persistence of fruit.

Lovely silky tannins, delicious freshness. Elegance, finesse – a classic. Medium-plus body. **Drink** 2015–2035 **Alc** 14.5%



### **Hamelin Bay, Cabernet**

**Sauvignon 2010** 17.5 (91)

£18.79 Ellis of Richmond

Cassis, smoky, capsicums, herbs and mint. Rich, intense, persistent fruit. The tannins, equally rich and long, are up to the task. Full-bodied. Very Pessac-Léognan-like. **Drink** 2015–2035 **Alc** 14.5%

### **Houghton, Gladstones Cabernet Sauvignon 2010**

17.5 (91)

N/A UK [www.houghton-wines.com.au](http://www.houghton-wines.com.au)

Complex aroma and palate of ripe capsicum, herbs, liquorice, blue fruits and mint. Richness and intensity, ripe tannins, great freshness and length. About full-bodied. **Drink** 2015–2035 **Alc** 13.6%

### **Juniper Estate, Cabernet Sauvignon 2010**

17.5 (91)

£19.99 Adnams

Liquorice and ripe blueberry fruit with intensity. Suave tannins, round, silky finish. Feminine, elegant and medium-bodied.

**Drink** 2015–2035 **Alc** 14.4%

For full details of UK stockists, see p84