

## AUSTRALIA'S WILD WEST

**Western Australia's pioneering spirit is alive and well in its wine regions, which seem capable of turning almost any grape variety into gold.**

JOE CZERWINSKI | Aug 6, 2013

A frown flickers across the face of hunter smith as we near the interchange. Despite recent advice to the contrary, it's apparent that the highway from Margaret River to Frankland River is closed for roadwork. Without missing a beat, Smith—part of the family that owns Frankland Estate winery—swings his bulky Holden Colorado SUV onto the partially paved secondary road that we'll follow instead.

At times a single dirt track, it widens as we approach hillocks so we can move left and avoid oncoming traffic. There isn't any. We bounce along, taking care not to drop too much of our "brekkie burgers"—scrambled eggs, thickly sliced bacon and barbecue sauce—in our laps. Outside the car, vast open spaces and scrublands scarred by bushfires zip past, along with the occasional bodies of unfortunate marsupials. Behind us, a reddish haze of kicked-up dirt traces our path. Far from the country's teeming mining regions and the coast's bustling cosmopolitan cities, this is a very different Australia.

Here, in the southwestern corner of Western Australia, although vines were planted by some of the original settlers in the mid 19th century, grape growing and winemaking are uncommon and relatively recent pursuits, born of a few prescient individuals' vision and nurtured by the backbreaking labor of others.

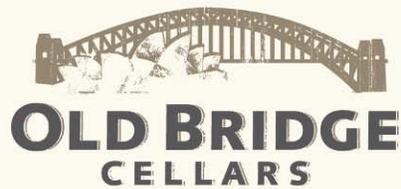
### Western Pioneers

The first visionary to arrive was Harold Olmo, a professor at the University of California at Davis. As part of a program to diversify the state's economy, he was invited by the government of Western Australia to prospect for sites that could support viticulture. His report, published in 1956, identified Frankland River, Margaret River and Mount Barker as areas capable of producing European-style table wines.

Next up was John Gladstones, a Western Australian agronomist specializing in lupines. A wine lover, he carried out painstaking climatic research that quantified the similarities between Margaret River and Bordeaux in terms of heat summation and distribution. Published in 1965, Gladstones's work didn't exactly ignite a land rush, but Tom Cullity planted Vasse Felix's first vines in 1967. Over the next decade, other pioneering vintners—including one Robert Mondavi—followed Cullity.

**Mondavi found his way to Margaret River in 1973, when he tried to purchase property there from Dennis Horgan. But Horgan, a Perth businessman who had acquired the property along with a plumbing business in 1969, refused to sell. He did meet with Mondavi, and the two entered a brief partnership in which Mondavi provided consulting services as Horgan developed Leeuwin Estate into a vineyard and winery.**

**"I was a beer-drinking surfie," says Horgan. "We just got on well."**



Other early Margaret River wineries include Cape Mentelle (established 1970), Cullen (1971) and Moss Wood (1969). All continue to produce high-quality wines. Steadily, a region once known for its natural beauty, surfer lifestyle and perennially high unemployment transformed into a burgeoning wine destination.

## Modern Margaret River

Today, Margaret River is Western Australia's most renowned wine region, stretching approximately 60 miles from north to south between Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin. Surrounded on three sides by water, the climate is moderated by the adjoining oceans. The warm waters of the Indian Ocean lap at the northern and western shores, while the cold Southern Ocean grows up from the south.

"It's a Mediterranean climate with a maritime influence," says Virginia Willcock, who has been the winemaker at Vasse Felix since 2006.

Margaret River's subregions—delineated in 1999 by Gladstones based on climate and drainage basin—remain unofficial, but are referenced often by winemakers. Along the western coast, from north to south, lie Yallingup, Wilyabrup, Wallcliffe and Karridale. Just to the east lie Carburnup, in the north, and Treeton, in the center. Most of the original vineyards lie in the Wilyabrup and Wallcliffe subregions, where Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay thrive.

"Wilyabrup is chocolate-rich," says Rob Mann, senior winemaker and estate director of Cape Mentelle, speaking about Cabernet Sauvignon. "Further south is more structured and red-fruited."

**"Cabernet is at home in Margaret River," says Vanya Cullen, who runs her family winery in accordance to biodynamic principles. "It just grows so easily."**

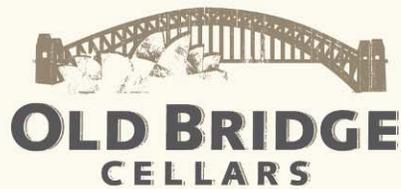
While most growers agree that Cabernet is the region's easiest grape, it hasn't always been smooth sailing. Back in the early 1990s, says Cliff Royle, general manager and chief winemaker for Flametree Wines, the Cabernets were relatively low in alcohol and often a bit green. In the late '90s, the pendulum swung the other direction, and many of the wines were high in alcohol, with stewed fruit flavors. Today, the moderate alcohol levels and ripe flavors so prevalent in the region can be attributed to better viticulture and site selection.

"The best, most consistent vineyards are in a very small area," says Royle.

That said, winemakers often source fruit from several different subregions. Stuart Pym, production manager and senior winemaker for Stella Bella, manages 225 acres of vineyards in six locations, all south of the town of Margaret River. "Red wines from this part of Margaret River are finer wines, with a bit more perfume and elegance," he says.

At the extreme southern end of Margaret River, in Karridale, most of the vineyards are devoted to white grape varieties because of the dramatic cooling effects of the Southern Ocean. Yet, even here, there are exceptions. Erl Happ grows 30 different varieties—21 of them red—and claims he's "able to ripen all of them with ease." Pym's Otro Vino—a blend of Touriga Nacional and Tinta Cão and bottled under Stella Bella's Skuttlebutt label—comes from Happ's vineyard and supports his conclusion. It offers a juicy mouthful of medium-bodied blueberry fruit tinged with spice.

One of the few wineries to prominently feature subregions on the wine labels, Cape Mentelle is making a blended red and a blended white labeled Wilyabrup and Wallcliffe, respectively.



"We're trying to get people to go beyond the variety and talk about region, subregion and vineyard," says Mann. "It's getting back to those classical, terroir-based wines." Given the French ownership of Cape Mentelle—it's been part of luxury group LVMH since 1990—this sentiment isn't surprising. But most Western Australian wineries stick to varietal labeling.

## Frankland River

One obvious exception is Frankland Estate's Olmo's Reward, a Bordeaux-inspired blend of Cabernet Franc and Merlot, named for the pioneering American professor. Barry Smith—Hunter's father—came out to Frankland River 40 years ago as a farmer, when the only vineyard in the region was a research plot on a neighboring property.

"We saw the quality of the fruit they were getting next door and figured we'd diversify a bit," says Barry. His wife, Judy, is less matter of fact: "When we came here, we were seduced by the Rieslings from our neighbors," she says. And it is Frankland River's Rieslings that have put—and kept—the region on the map. While the Bordeaux varieties can be excellent and the Shiraz is consistently good, the Rieslings show the most distinction.

"They have a wet stone, mineral characteristic that we see in a lot of the wines from the region," says Hunter. Frankland Estate now bottles three single-vineyard dry Rieslings and a "kabinett"-style Riesling, all of which have the ability to age elegantly for 10 years or more.

## Mount Barker

Frankland River is just one subzone within the sprawling Great Southern appellation, or Geographic Indication (G.I.) as they're known in Australia. Nearby Mount Barker is another one, with slightly warmer temperatures.

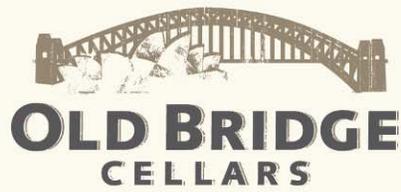
**Nevertheless, says Cath Oates, winemaker for Mount Barker's Plantagenet Wines, "Cool climate is what Great Southern is all about." Oates is originally from Margaret River, so she's in a unique position to compare the regions. "Stylistically, Margaret River is bolder and more voluptuous," she says, speaking about Cabernet. "It's that classic cassis. Here, we're briary and red currants." But, she says, "Shiraz was one of the big drawing cards to come here."**

**Plantagenet's Shirazes are plummy and rich, with deep mocha shadings but plenty of savory spice, and bright acids that make them surprisingly versatile at the table.**

Other parts of Great Southern producing notable wines include Porongurup, Albany and Denmark. Albany and Denmark are both on the coast, more exposed to the cooling influence of the Southern Ocean and more susceptible to untimely rain events. Based on the limited tastings I had time for while visiting Albany, the coastal subregions seem to do well with Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Pinot Noir also shows potential.

"Great Southern isn't a Pinot Noir district," says Rob Wignall, before pouring me a taste of his very good 2010 Pinot Noir from Albany, redolent of cherry and beetroot. It's deep and spicy, just a little coarse on the finish.

"The introduction of Burgundian clones has been the biggest thing," says Harewood Estate's James Kellie. His 2010 Reserve Pinot Noir, grown near Denmark, blows me away with its combination of delicate floral notes and sublime silkiness. It's a tasting experience that makes me realize how little we know about viticulture and the potential for great wines in this far-off corner of the world. And the resulting smile isn't just because this wine is so good, but because of how many other great wines are still out there in Western Australia, waiting to be grown, made and discovered.



## WINE REVIEWS: OLD BRIDGE CELLARS PORTFOLIO

### **93pts Cullen 2010 Kevin John Chardonnay (Margaret River)**

One of Australia's leading Chardonnays, this is wonderfully mouthfilling and fleshy, yet remains cool and sophisticated. Buttery, toasty and nutty notes accent grilled peach and pineapple flavors, all pulled together on the finish by a refreshing squeeze of lime-driven citrus.

### **93pts Leeuwin Estate 2009 Art Series Chardonnay (Margaret River)**

Leeuwin's 2009 is a worthy successor to the flamboyant 2008. While perhaps just a touch more restrained in aroma and flavor despite being higher in alcohol, it still shows off flashy notes of grilled peach and pineapple. As always, it's full bodied and luscious without being overblown, and has a lingering finish.

### **91pts Plantagenet 2010 Chardonnay (Mount Barker)**

Plushly styled. Editors' Choice.

