

Wine & Spirits

Sonoma Cabernet

Illustrating Four
Distinctive Reds

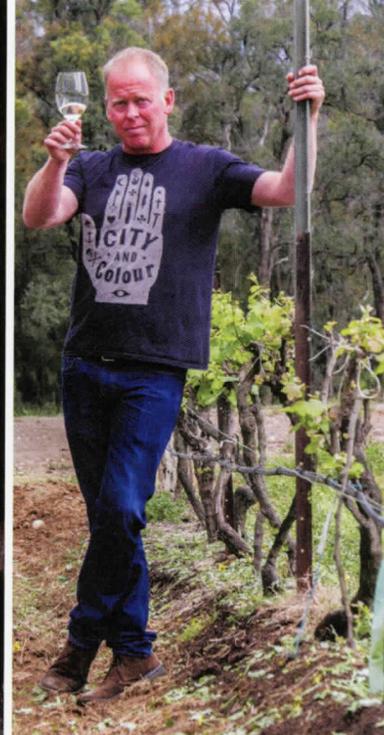


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Sommelier Scavenger Hunt

2015: Australia

Venture to Australia and the commercial impression we have of Aussie wine soon falls away. Fruit-forward shiraz and red blends with critter labels turn out to be a lot of noise in the market. Drink local in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide or Perth and the wine lists reveal a completely different reality: the 20 percent of the industry made up of hundreds of small producers, many turning out wines that capture their vineyards in distinctive ways.

Recently, we've begun to see more of those wines on our shores, and as we considered where to hold our second annual Sommelier Scavenger Hunt, we felt the time was ripe to send 15 sommeliers to Australia, setting them loose to investigate five regions in depth, completely unrestricted by any politics, lighting out to find wines that speak most clearly of where they are grown. Some of those wines would likely be imported already, others might not.

While the sommeliers we reached out to weren't generally on intimate terms with Aussie wines, they knew enough about Australia's winegrowing history and recent stylistic shifts to be intrigued. When we contacted Jared Hooper of LA's *Faith & Flower* about leading a team, he gained clearance from his restaurant and assembled a full team within five hours of receiving our invitation. Hooper, a longtime fan of the Yarra Yering wines, decided to lead his team to the Yarra Valley in search of pinot noir.

Michael Madrigale, Michelle Bisceglia and Josiah Baldivino won the inaugural Sommelier Scavenger Hunt Taste-Off last year by focusing on a stalwart—Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon—and convincing a panel of wine professionals that the region, often dismissed by sommeliers as rife with spoofed luxury wines, remains a source of cabernet with an indelible (and delicious) sense of place. We invited them to participate again this year, and they took a similar tack, choosing to travel to McLaren Vale, a long-established region everyone thought they understood. Using the lens of old-vine grenache, they instead presented a place of unexpected diversity.

We enlisted Lulu McAllister, who runs the lists at *Nopa* and *Liholiho Yacht Club* in San Francisco, to lead a team about a month before we began to tally the results of our Best New Sommelier poll. (She happened to be voted one of the Best New Sommeliers of 2015.) Her team set out to investigate chardonnay in Margaret River, on the Indian Ocean coast.

John Szabo, a Master Sommelier based in Toronto, took his team to the Hunter Valley in search of semillon.

And Carlton McCoy, Master Sommelier and wine director at *The Little Nell* in Aspen, Colorado,

convinced two friends to track down cool-climate pinot noir in Tasmania.

Each team presented six wines to 40 of their peers in a Taste-Off at Bluxome Street Winery in San Francisco. The only technology allowed was a corkscrew, an easel and a drawing pad, though some of the teams prepared materials in advance. The assembled panel of sommeliers, retailers, winemakers and press judged the teams on the quality of their wine selections, the coherence of the flight and the strength of their presentations—how well they portrayed the breadth of terroir expression in their respective regions.

In the end, when the votes were tallied, it was Michael Madrigale, Michelle Bisceglia and Josiah Baldivino who once again proved victorious.

The six wines they chose gave what Madrigale described as “a 360-degree view” of McLaren Vale, from sandy soils to ironstone, sandy loam and clay, from flat land to high elevation, from 13 percent to 16 percent alcohol, from young vines and old. The Jauma 2014 Alfred Grenache, hailing from a vineyard planted in 1997, showed the lighter side of Aussie grenache in fruit that was bright red, snappy and mouthwatering yet elastic. The 2013 Noon Eclipse, made by Master of Wine Drew Noon from his family's old vines, showed the other end of the spectrum in the warmth of its alcohol and its savory, iron-fisted structure.

Team Hunter Valley was just a few votes shy of victory. Canadians John Szabo, MS, Brad Royale and Véronique Rivest charmed the audience with a lineup of wines that included benchmarks like Tyrrell's Vat 1, Mount Pleasant Lovedale and Brokenwood ILR, demonstrating semillon's ageability with impressively youthful examples from the 2005 and 2007 vintages.

Regardless of how their individual teams fared, all of the sommeliers presented views of Australia not often seen from this distance, both in the glass and in the enthusiasm for the wines they weren't able to bring back to present at the Taste-Off. The Aussie wines that make it to the US, they told us, only scratch the surface of a country that sustains some of the world's oldest vines and contributes some of the most technologically advanced winemaking, with some of the warmest and some of the coolest growing regions on earth.

Clockwise from top left: Lulu McAllister; vineyards in Margaret River; Hunter semillon; Andrew Thomas at Braemore Vineyard; Josef Chromy Vineyard in Tamar Valley, Tasmania; Tasmania pinot noir vineyards; Margaret River; Gretchen Buck, Chelsea Coleman and Lulu McAllister at Cullen Wines in Margaret River; Mount Pleasant Lovedale Vineyard.



Hunter Valley

An Unlikely Classic

At our Sommelier Scavenger Hunt Taste-Off, John Szabo drew a horizontal line across a sheet of 30" x 25" paper to help the audience visualize the typical Hunter semillon vineyard. "Dead flat," he said. "Totally unremarkable. Sandy soil. All of the things we get excited about as sommeliers, they're not there."

"Yet we would argue," he said, "that Hunter semillon is the most unique white wine in the Southern Hemisphere."

As Szabo and his team pointed out, in many ways Hunter semillon is a very unlikely and counterintuitive phenomenon: a white wine from a "bloody hot," humid region that manages to feel zesty yet completely ripe at less than 11 percent alcohol. A wine fermented in stainless steel and rushed into bottle a few months later. A wine that often tastes like next to nothing in its youth, yet ages into something astonishingly complex.

In the Hunter, three wines are universally recognized as benchmarks: Tyrrell's Vat 1, Mount Pleasant Lovedale and Brokenwood ILR. Team Hunter included them among their six selections and they did not disappoint. Beyond those, the team sought out three other examples: a wine that showed well in its youth, a wine

John Szabo, MS, team leader, *Wine Align* (Toronto)
 Véronique Rivest, *Soif Wine Bar* (Gatineau, Quebec)
 Brad Royale, Canadian Rocky Mountain Resorts (Calgary)

that delivered amazing value and a wine that shed a different light on Hunter semillon. —LUKE SYKORA

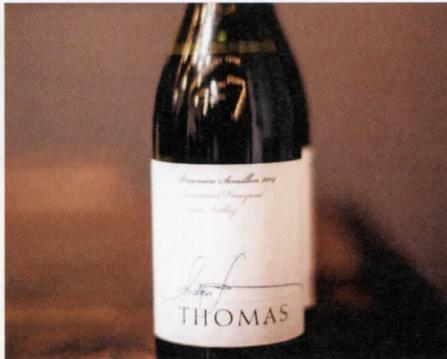
Andrew Thomas 2014 Braemore Semillon

Braemore is a classic old-vine semillon site, planted in 1969 on sand along the Hunter River; it's just a two-minute drive down Hermitage Road from Andrew Thomas's winery. "This is Hunter semillon in its embryonic stage," Szabo told the Taste-Off audience. "Youthful. Shy in the glass. It's not showing much." Still, among many hard-to-read young semillons, this stood out to Team Hunter as a refreshing, crisp example of where the wines begin. (*H. Mercer Wine & Spirits Imports, Los Angeles, CA*)

Brokenwood 2005 ILR Reserve Semillon

"Around eight or ten years the clouds part and the sun starts to appear," said Rivest when she introduced this wine. "This is when semillon—Hunter Valley semillon—starts to come into its own. The purity of the lime fruit of its youth makes room for more fatness, aromas of lanolin, beeswax, buttered toast." First made in 1992 as a selection of the vintage's best fruit, ILR is named





after longtime Brokenwood winemaker Iain Leslie Riggs—“a winemaker so convinced that the best thing to represent Hunter is semillon,” Rivest said, “that his license plate is ILR SEM.” (Beyond semillon, Brokenwood’s Graveyard Shiraz stood out to Team Hunter as the best red wine they tasted on their visit.) (*Old Bridge Cellars, Napa, CA*)

Tyrrell’s 2005 Vat 1 Semillon

Introduced in 1963, Tyrrell’s Vat 1 now comes almost exclusively from the Short Flat Vineyard, planted in 1923 and 1964, just down the hill from the Tyrrell family’s eldest vines, shiraz planted in 1879. The semillon vines grow in deep, fine sand. Since the mid-1980s, the wine has been made in stainless steel, defining a racy style that’s now become the norm. To Szabo, it earned its benchmark status and then some, showing “the line, the precision, the purity of those ultimately boring-looking vineyards.” The 2005 is just starting to unfurl—like the ILR from the same year—into a rich complexity. (*Broadbent Selections, San Francisco, CA*)

Mt. Pleasant 2007 Elizabeth Cellar Reserve Semillon

Now owned by McWilliam’s, Mount Pleasant was established by Maurice O’Shea in 1921 and became the first serious table-wine producer in the Hunter. If you visit Mount Pleasant’s cellar door (that’s Aussie for tasting room), you can buy the cellar-aged version of their Elizabeth Semillon for \$17. It comes from vines planted in 1946 and the early 1990s. In the 2007, a strong vintage for semillon and long aging combined to create a wine that Team Hunter found classic, rich yet precise, and almost embarrassingly well priced. (*Not imported in the US; available in Canada.*)

Harkham 2015 Azizas Semillon

Winemaker Richard Harkham’s Hunter semillon is barrel fermented, taken through malolactic conversion, never fined or filtered, and bottled without sulfur—as “natural” as they come. “Exactly the opposite of everything that goes as standard for Hunter semillon,” Royale said. At first it made the team think about process more than terroir...and yet in one sense, it was the least “processed” wine they tasted in the Hunter. As atypical as it was, they found themselves drinking it, as satisfied as they were puzzled—it did, after all, still have an uncanny typicity that made it feel like Hunter semillon, just seen through a different lens. (*Vine Street Imports, Mount Laurel, NJ*)

Mount Pleasant 2007 Lovedale Semillon

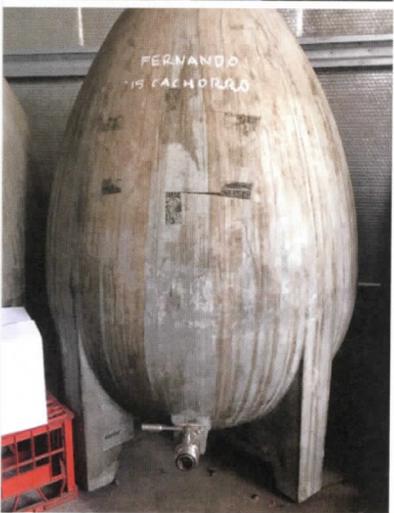
Lovedale, more than any other wine, is the reason Szabo chose to lead his team to the Hunter: He’s long been a fan of the wine. Lovedale is a vineyard that Maurice O’Shea planted in 1946 on a flat, sandy expanse that formerly served as a military airstrip during WWII. At Mount Pleasant’s cellar door, Szabo and Royale were floored by a multi-vintage tasting that took them from 2014 all the way back to 1986. “That 2007 just has everything,” said Royale. Late on their last night in the Hunter, Szabo and Royale sat outside on a porch finishing off a bottle of the 2007 Lovedale and listening to the second movement of Beethoven’s Seventh, trying to spot the Southern Cross while comparisons to Montrachet and Coche-Dury danced in their heads. (*Not imported in the US; available in Canada.*)

Opposite page, from top: Braemore Vineyard; Chris Tyrrell in the Short Flat Vineyard; tank at Andrew Thomas wines.

This page, clockwise from top left: John Szabo, MS, Brad Royale and Véronique Rivest; Brad Royale; Stuart Hordern at Brokenwood; young Andrew Thomas bottle; old Mount Pleasant bottle.



Lulu McAllister, team leader, *Nopa* and *Liholiho Yacht Club* (San Francisco)
 Gretchen Buck, *Absinthe* (San Francisco)
 Chelsea Coleman, *The Rose Wine Bar + Bottle Shop* (San Diego)



Margaret River

Chardy Party

The last time Lulu McAllister had been in Australia, she was 16, on a student trip, where she was caught drinking a sweet, fizzy alcoholic soda. Gretchen Buck and Chelsea Coleman had never been.

“Before we went, I have to admit that when I thought Australian chardonnay, I thought huge oak, alcohol-driven wines,” Buck said. “Instead, it was a series of delicious ah-ha moments.”

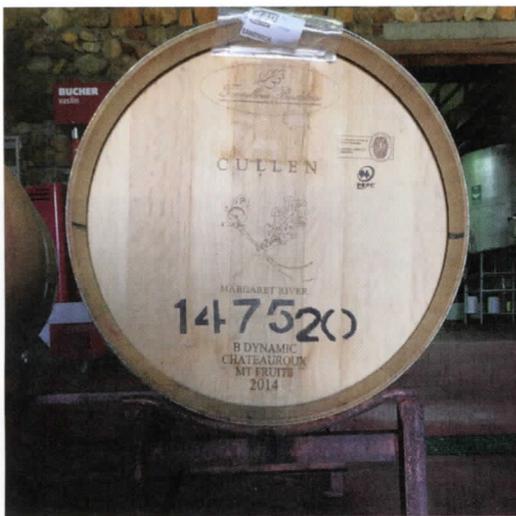
While they were well aware of Western Australia’s surf culture and the beautiful beaches of Margaret River, the vineyard environment came as a complete surprise. “I’d always equated the region with a desert going straight into an ocean,” said McAllister. Buck described it as verdantly green: “There’s so much humidity in the air, and yet you always have these breezes from ‘The Doctor,’” she explained, referring to a wind off the South Sea. The combination seems to lend itself to low-intervention and biodynamic winemaking, something they weren’t expecting. “Natural” was a word that kept cropping up in their descriptions of the place and its wines.

While some of Australia’s most elegant cabernet sauvignons come from the region, the team found the

most excitement in chardonnay. “Cabernet blends are more widely discussed,” McAllister explained, “but the people who’ve tried the chardonnay from here talk about it in a whisper, as if they’ve discovered it. The winemakers are really taking chardonnay seriously.”

Tasting for themselves, they found Margaret River chardonnay to have a distinct profile, one defined by the cool ocean breezes, the Mediterranean climate and the Gin Gin clone, what McAllister called “a local-hero clone.” Prone to millerandage, Gin Gin vines yield sparingly and give grapes with a high ratio of skin to juice, which, she explained, adds a lot of depth to its flavors. “They tend to have this interesting hyperwhite floral on the nose and a little bit of citrus followed by a really intense core of orchard fruit, specifically pear. The hand of the New World is shaking the hand of the Old World here,” McAllister said. “Someone who might value white Burgundy might appreciate the freshness of these wines; somebody who appreciates opulence can find that here, too.”

Chardonnay wasn’t the only variety they found exciting. They all wished they could have included a sparkling chenin blanc from Blind Corners. They don’t



make chardonnay, Coleman said, but they do produce the biodynamic calendar app she consults daily, as she found out when they arrived. “The runner up for me would have been the cabernet from Vasse Felix,” McAllister added. “Their chardonnay is very impressive, but their cab is killer.” —TARA Q. THOMAS

Higher Plane 2010 Chardonnay

Higher Plane is a property owned by Juniper Estate, one of the oldest wineries in Margaret River, started in 1973. The vineyard is in Forest Grove, about nine miles south of the town of Margaret River, a slightly cooler site than Juniper to the north thanks to the proximity of the South Sea, which sends cool breezes over the vineyards as well as frequent cloud cover during the spring and summer. That distinct maritime influence keeps the acidity high, the tanginess of the wine’s fruit warmed by smoky tones of barrel fermentation and toasty lees. (*Red Earth Wines, Seattle, WA*)

Voyager 2012 Estate Project 95 Chardonnay

Voyager is the estate that sealed the deal on chardonnay for McAllister. “They are so focused on chardonnay and doing such a great job reinventing it, actively experimenting with yeast and clonal selections.” The team wanted to show the Project Gin Gin chardonnay, but it wasn’t available; this bottling is made from Clone 95, a Dijon clone that gives a less fruity, more restrained chardonnay — “another view of what’s possible there,” said McAllister. Even so, she added, “because it’s cooler, you’ll taste a lot of pear, and that French new oak.” (*Hudson Wine Brokers, San Francisco, CA*)

Hay Shed Hill 2012 Chardonnay

“This is from Wilyabrup,” McAllister said, referring to what’s generally considered the heart of Margaret River’s winemaking region. “It’s about two-thirds of the way up [the peninsula], a little warmer, with slightly less of that cooling influence from the South Sea.” At the same time, this vineyard sits only a little over a mile from the Indian Ocean. This bottling shows the Gin Gin clone in all its bright, citrusy fragrance. With 40 percent new oak and no malolactic or lees stirring, it was one of the leanest wines on the table, with a core of juicy tropical fruit flavor. (*Craft + Estate/The Winebow Group, NY*)

Woodlands 2012 Chloe Chardonnay

“Also from Wilyabrup, this one is a slightly more opulent expression,” said McAllister. “It gets a similar oak regime — about a third to forty percent new French oak. But this one does see some lees stirring; they are trying to round out that naturally high acidity, which you get in the Gin Gin clone and also from the cooling influence from the ocean here.” Like Juniper, Woodlands was started in 1973, one of the first five wineries in the area. “This is also one of the premier bio wineries,” she added, “along with Cullen and Vasse Felix.” (*Vine Street Imports, Mount Laurel, NJ*)

Vasse Felix 2013 Heytsbury Chardonnay

Buck introduced Heytsbury as “the oldest vineyard in Margaret River, planted in 1967.” She related how the winemaker, Virginia Willcock, started her career learning conventional winemaking, but was converted to more natural winemaking techniques after stints at some small, rural wineries in Europe. “She took some of those philosophies along with her New World training back to Vasse Felix, and that’s what you have here. While it’s seen a decent amount of French oak, it has no forced malolactic fermentation.” It’s bright and lively, the broad yeastiness of the wine contrasted by what the audience perceived as Margaret River’s hallmark tangy acidity. (*Negociants USA, Napa, CA*)

Cullen 2012 Kevin John Chardonnay

McAllister described Cullen as the “new classic,” and Coleman added: “They started New World in mind, and they came to biodynamics out of necessity: In 1987 they were getting such low yields because the soil was so alkaline that they couldn’t make a go of it. They fought back with biodynamics.” For Coleman, Cullen as a whole makes a good representation of the area. “It’s a very pristine, natural place; even when we drove five hours from Perth, there were signs everywhere about not letting outside seeds or outside soil in from anywhere.” Buck points out that all the vines are own-rooted, too. “And there are so many vineyard problems that they just don’t have because of the ‘Doctor,’ she said, referring to the wind. “It’s a paradise.” (*Old Bridge Cellars, Napa, CA*)

For an inside peak of the team’s trip, check out #teammargaretriver on Instagram.

Opposite page, from top: Vines at Cullen Wines; compost at Cullen; concrete egg at Si Vintners. Above, from left: Barrel at Cullen Wines; Gretchen Buck, Lulu McAllister and Chelsea Coleman; boots on the ground at Piero.



“Every wine was expressive and well made, yet each represented a completely different style and point of view. That is not easy to accomplish with chardonnay.” — Laura Catena



Tasmania

Pinot Noir from (Far) Down Under

Carlton McCoy, MS, team leader, *The Little Nell* (Aspen, CO)
 Andy Myers, MS, ThinkFoodGroup (Washington, DC)
 Amy Racine, *Sons & Daughters* (San Francisco)

When offered the chance to explore any region in Australia, Carlton McCoy decided to step as far as possible outside of his comfort zone.

“Not only had I never been to Tasmania—no one I know had ever been to Tasmania,” he told us when he arrived in San Francisco for our Sommelier Scavenger Hunt Taste-Off.

He enlisted fellow “cool-climate geeks” Andy Myers and Amy Racine to tag along. Given Tasmania’s proximity to the Arctic, they expected to find low-alcohol, high-acid pinot noir. But they weren’t on intimate terms with the wines.

“We came here with very little knowledge,” said Myers. He recalled pouring the Tamar Ridge pinot noir back around 2007. Racine poured Jansz, a Tasmanian sparkling wine, by the glass when she worked at a restaurant in Utah. That was about it.

But as they made their way through a multiregional blind tasting during their first day in Tasmania, they felt the excitement building. “The overall impression of the wines was incredible,” McCoy told the Taste-Off audience. “I would spend my own money on these

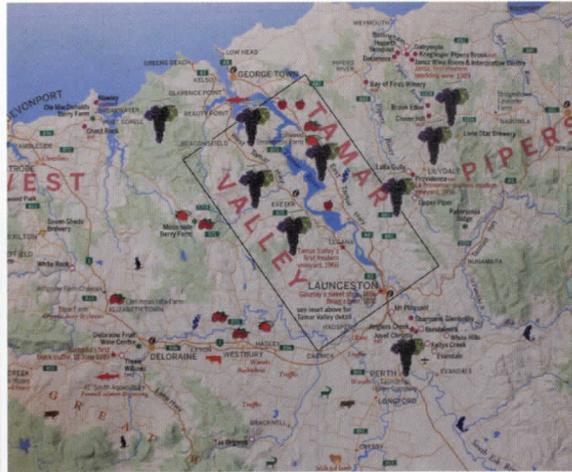
wines,” he found himself thinking.

As they explored back roads flanked by grand eucalyptus-covered slopes and sheep- and cow-dotted pastures, along with an occasional vineyard, they zeroed in on three growing regions to highlight: Coal River in southern Tasmania, and Pipers River and Tamar Valley in the north.

“Pinot noir should be crunchy and tense—the great ones are,” said McCoy. In Tasmania, the team found no shortage of crunch and tension. —L.S.

Poolley 2014 Cooina Vale Pinot Noir

“What else do you dream of as a winemaker than to have limestone in a cool climate?” McCoy asked the audience. The Poolley family established Cooina Vale, one of the Coal River Valley’s first modern vineyards, in 1985. The valley is a particularly cool, dry region in southern Tasmania with an extremely long growing season, and Team Tasmania was especially impressed by Poolley. “Collectively, they probably give the best example of the elegance, high-toned, fresh, vibrant fruit and crunchy acidity that you get from Tasmanian



pinot noir, and that makes them infinitely drinkable,” said McCoy. “It’s not just good for Tasmanian pinot noir, it’s good for any pinot noir in any region of the world.” (*Not imported.*)

Pooley 2014 Butcher’s Hill Pinot Noir

The contrast between Pooley’s Cooina Vale and Butcher’s Hill wines exemplified, for Team Tasmania, how drastic site difference can be in a region on the knife’s edge of ripeness. The vineyards are a mere five miles apart, but Butcher’s Hill features sandstone rather than limestone, and receives less coastal influence. Racine noted that while the wine is tangy, it’s quite distinct, more dense and dark-fruited compared to the Cooina Vale despite near-identical winemaking. (*Not imported.*)

Tolpuddle 2014 Pinot Noir

A bottle of the 2013 Tolpuddle was the last wine Team Tasmania drank on their final dinner in Tasmania, at *Black Cow Bistro* in Launceston. Like the Cooina Vale wine, this takes advantage of some of the island’s oldest pinot noir vines, planted in 1988. “This was one of the more savory ones [in Coal River],” Racine said of the Tolpuddle, its tart red fruit freshened by a minty imprint of whole-bunch fermentation. (*Craft + Estate/The Winebow Group, NY*)

Dalrymple 2012 Cottage Block Pinot Noir

In contrast to the cool, lean Coal River style, the pinot noirs from Pipers River and Tamar Valley—grown in vineyards laced with volcanic rock—tend to be more opulent. “More black fruit, dense, meaty,” Myers said, contrasting them with the more herbaceous wines from the south. This wine, from Dalrymple’s home estate

with a view of the distant Pacific, exemplified for him the overarching character of the best Tasmanian pinot noir: “These are New World fruit wines with Old World acidity and structure.” (*Negociants USA, Napa, CA*)

Josef Chromy 2012 Estate Pinot Noir

Based at a sizeable and dramatic sloping vineyard near Launceston, Josef Chromy is one of Tasmania’s three largest producers. The estate and its pinot noir served as the team’s entrée to the Tamar Valley as they drove north from Hobart. “It’s where the savory starts to begin—sage, the spice of Thanksgiving stuffing at the back of the wine,” said Myers. ‘Snappy yet dark fruit with a hint of sage’ became an instantaneously recognizable fingerprint of a Tamar wine for Team Tassie. (*American Estates Wines, Summit, NJ*)

Holm Oak 2014 Pinot Noir

Rebecca and Tim Duffy of Holm Oak grow pinot noir on a rocky, volcanic peninsula in the Tamar River not far from the sea. It’s a relatively warm and humid area, with dramatic geology. “I like the spirit of this winemaking family,” said McCoy. “Their vineyard is basically just a big slab of volcanic rock.” Tim Duffy is in the process of expanding the vineyard where the estate slopes down toward the river—slow going, since they have to break up the boulders to put in posts and vines. To Team Tassie, Rebecca and Tim exemplified the current ethos in Tasmania: still planting, still experimenting with whole-bunch fermentation and a range of clones, trying to farm with fewer inputs, still honing in on what makes their site unique while turning out wines with structure and personality. (*Hudson Wine Brokers, San Francisco, CA*)

Opposite page, from top: Indigenous Animal Preserve at Pressing Matters Winery outside of Hobart; Peter Caldwell of Dalrymple; lunch at Freycinet Marine Farm in Coles Bay. This page, clockwise from top left: Amy Racine, Andy Myers, Carlton McCoy; map of Tamar Valley; Taste-Off wines; Holm Oak Vineyard; Penny Jones at Bay of Fires.

“Not only did the Tasmania pinots express a place; the way that they expressed it could be, and was, succinctly explained: ‘New-World fruit wines with Old World acidity and texture.’”

—W. Blake Gray



Jared Hooper, team leader, *Faith & Flower* (Los Angeles)
 Sarah Clarke, *Osteria Mozza* (Los Angeles)
 Paul Coker, *Michael Mina's Stonehill Tavern* (Monarch Beach, CA)



Yarra Valley

Inventing (and Reinventing) Aussie Pinot

As they flew from their home city of Los Angeles toward Melbourne, the members of Team Yarra had a fortuitous encounter with a Qantas in-flight sommelier, who whisked them away to the business lounge and poured them Jacquart and Pol Roger Champagne. Not a bad start.

Jared Hooper first discovered the Yarra Valley via Yarra Yering's shiraz, but had more recently tasted a few exciting pinot noirs from Yarra, and heard they were just the tip of the iceberg. In particular, the names Timo Meyer and Mac Forbes kept coming up as the leaders of the New Yarra.

Once on the ground, Team Yarra found a region with a long winemaking history that is still reinventing itself.

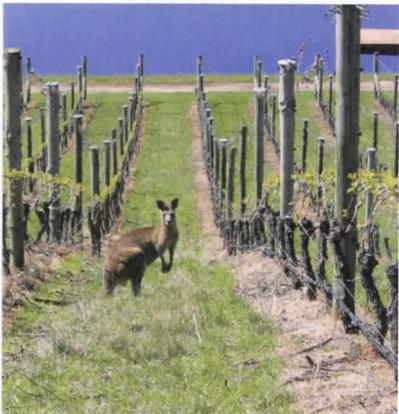
Vines came to the Yarra in 1838, when some Scottish cattle drovers decided to stop at this valley northeast of Melbourne and plant grapes. These days, the winemaking culture is anything but old-fashioned. The region's proximity to Victoria's cosmopolitan, food-obsessed capital encourages winemakers to experiment with cool sites far into the hills, and whole-bunch fermentations without added yeast, as they try to capture

transparent renditions of each site.

Team Yarra inserted itself into the middle of the fray and returned with a diverse selection of wines that spoke to the region's past and its future, to its traditional stalwarts and freewheeling innovators. —L.S.

Mac Forbes 2013 Wesburn Pinot Noir

Since Mac Forbes opened his tasting bar in downtown Healesville last year, it's become a nerve center of the region. On multiple visits, the Yarra team ran into local winemakers who stopped by to share bottles and talk shop. There were only four bottles of Wesburn left at Mac Forbes' cellar door when the team visited, so even though this vivid, racy wine could have been the lynchpin for their presentation, they requested Forbes Woori Yallock bottling instead. As it turned out, Woori was sold out here in the States, but there was plenty of Wesburn, a wine few American buyers recognize. It comes from a remote vineyard that Forbes discovered in the coolest reaches of the Upper Yarra, where vineyards and pastures taper off into verdant forests of eucalyptus, wattle and tree ferns. Planted in 1981, the vines at Wesburn grow on gray siltstone clay, which Forbes con-





siders the region's ideal pinot noir soil. He harvested the 2013 at 12.2 percent potential alcohol and did not chaptalize. "He says he wants to strive for site, not for pinot," Hooper told the Taste-Off audience. (*A.I. Selections, Long Island City, NY*)

Seville Estate 2013 Pinot Noir

Dr. Peter McMahon was one of the first to plant vines in the Yarra in the modern era, establishing Seville Estate in 1972. His grandson Dylan McMahon now makes the wines. "There's a flavor to our acidity," Dylan told the team when they visited, and it's a sentiment that stuck with them as they tasted this and other wines from the Upper Yarra. "Across the board," Paul Coker said, "what speaks to me is this tension, this electricity through the wines, this nervousity that you find throughout the Yarra." (*Hudson Wine Brokers, San Francisco, CA*)

Mount Mary 2010 Pinot Noir

"They kind of don't want people there," Clarke joked as she presented this wine at the Taste-Off. The winery entrance is virtually unmarked, and the Middleton family's fastidious focus on making classical, elegant estate wines is matched by a pointed aversion to self-promotion. (Along with Seville, they're one of the Yarra's first modern wineries.) "The wines are so good," Clarke told me after the tasting. "Elegant and balanced throughout. The '06 we had at Mount Mary was exceptional. That was probably my wine of the trip." Coker added that 2010 is actually a better vintage—and so this wine may end up eclipsing the 2006. (*Old Bridge Cellars, Napa, CA*)

Timo Mayer 2014 Dr. Mayer Pinot Noir

According to Team Yarra, Timo Mayer may be the world's most adamant whole-bunch devotee, with a cellar full of what he calls "the stemmy shit." Some Yarra winemakers apparently refer to him as the nutty professor of the bunch, yet for all of his experimentation, his bright, intense wines command respect. Like many of his wines, this is 100 percent whole bunch, the fruit sourced from the cool, high-elevation Bloody Hill Vineyard at the base of Mount Toolebewoong. (*Vine Street Imports, Mount Laurel, NJ*)

Yarra Yering 2006 Pinot Noir

To showcase a Yarra Valley pinot noir in its maturity, Team Yarra chose a classic. Along with Mount Mary and Seville, Yarra Yering is part of the original trio that rebooted the Yarra in the late 1960s and early 1970s; this wine comes from vines planted in 1969. "Yarra Yering is kind of the reason I have a fascination with the Yarra," said Hooper. (*Old Bridge Cellars, Napa, CA*)

Giant Steps 2014 Applejack Vineyard Pinot Noir

Team Yarra double-decanted this wine before presenting it to the Taste-Off audience in San Francisco. "It's such a beast," said Coker, before adding: "It's funny that we're calling it a beast of a wine." While it may be a big, modern wine in the context of the Yarra, they still found it to be floral and elegant. They were impressed by winemaker Steve Flamsheed's experimental drive. "He really feels that he hasn't even made his best wines yet," said Hooper. (*Old Bridge Cellars, Napa, CA*)

Opposite page, from top: Mac Forbes' Wesburn Vineyard; Steve Flamsted at Giant Steps; Giant Steps Sexton Vineyard.

This page, clockwise from top left: Paul Coker, Jared Hooper and Sarah Clarke; Yarra flight at the Taste-Off; Yarra selections at the Taste-Off; Mac Forbes; the local brew with a map of the region.



Michael Madrigale, team leader, *Boulud Sud* (NYC)
 Michelle Bisceglia, *Blue Hill* (NYC)
 Josiah Baldivino, *Bay Grape* (Oakland, CA)



From top: The coast at McLaren Vale; Gareth Belton of Gentle Folk in Adelaide Hills; tasting at S.C. Pannell.

McLaren Vale

Ancient Vines from the Beach to the Hills

“We were intrigued by the old vines,” said Michelle Bisceglia. Then Michael Madrigale jumped in. “They were left for dead after the cratering of the fortified wine industry. As Drew Noon said, ‘When I was in my twenties, I was embarrassed to come from this region. I didn’t think we had anything special.’ Now he’s flipped the script.”

Madrigale explained how the region was planted in the 1800s with grenache to satisfy a demand for fortified wine. “Then, in the 1980s, a lot of these old vines were ripped up, because there was no more market for sweet wines. The ones that lasted—it’s almost Darwinian—somehow these amazing 100-plus-year-old vines still survive, by the grace of God, after the whole movement to get rid of grenache and plant cabernet sauvignon or shiraz.”

“We were in Adelaide Hills first,” Josiah Baldivino recalled, where they tasted a range of varieties, from shiraz to nebbiolo. “We were playing the Scavenger Hunt game, asking winemakers, ‘What is the best grape of this region?’” Many of them were growing or buying grapes in McLaren Vale, and all of them said grenache.

Then they met Taras and Amber Ochota, who invited them to their house for dinner. “There was a little fat cat

in front of the fireplace, kids running around,” Baldivino said. “We were just drinking and eating—James Erskine of Jauma was there, Brendon and Kirstyn Keyes of BK were there with all their wines.”

Madrigale was immediately taken by the camaraderie among the winemakers. “That’s where we really noticed how well these guys play together,” he said. “They all had each other’s backs. They’re like a baseball squad.” Tasting the Ochota and Jauma wines that night set them on the grenache trail, narrowing their focus to McLaren Vale, with its assets of ancient vines. And it also got them thinking about how to present the wines, complete with a pack of vintage baseball cards. Bisceglia photoshopped the cards, switching out the face of each player with a winemaker’s mug, adding stats on the wine and a puzzle on the back. At the Taste-Off in San Francisco, Team McLaren Vale distributed the cards in cellophane packs, complete with a stick of Juicy Fruit gum.

With their six wines, they assembled what Madrigale described as “a 360-degree view of McLaren Vale,” with its range of soils, elevations and alcohol levels. Here’s their snapshot of the diverse terroir.

—JOSHUA GREENE