

## Tasting Report: 300 Margaret River Wines Tasted

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Late in 2015 James and I both took part in tastings, dinners and presentations at the Margaret River Gourmet Escape event in Western Australia. Whilst we were there we met with many of the local winemakers and took the opportunity to do a comprehensive tasting of the region's wines.

With nine consecutive vintages (2007 to 2015) that have delivered very good to great growing conditions, there is a wealth of great wine coming from this remote yet beautiful Australian wine region. The flagship Bordeaux-style wines, mostly cabernet-driven are in career-best form, there's no question the best Australian cabernet-based wines are coming from here.

The last decade has seen viticultural refinement and improved vineyard management come into play, improving the consistency of these red wines, especially in the area of consistently ripe tannins. They have long been flavoursome, powerfully so, but the refined structure is a more recent quality.

More judicious and refined blending is also a feature of recent vintages, a move that has not only assisted in improving overall quality and consistency, but one that has also further articulated intra-regional differences and estate style as well as vineyard personality. These wines are more refined, polished and packed with greater interest than ever before.





Chardonnay is the other big star of Margaret River and presents an interesting quandary for lovers of the super lean, modern style of Australian chardonnay. There's a civil war of sorts between the Yarra Valley and Margaret River chardonnay makers (although more vocal from the Yarra) as they slug it out with radically different styles, both very good. I'd wager the Margaret River winemakers really don't care too much what others do, their chardonnays have been refined but are naturally bolder, more generous and undeniably full of enjoyment.

These are opulent, luscious, concentrated and textural wines and they are full of pleasure. Look at the old stalwart, Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay, one of the biggest white wines made in Australia (and one of the best performers in terms of cellaring) and you have 750ml of pure satisfaction. There are many others, Vasse Felix, Flametree SRS (one of our top wines of 2015) to name a few, that reach impressive heights of combined power and focus.

Then there are the dry white Bordeaux-style blends of semillon and sauvignon blanc in either order. These work as simpler young fresh styles as well as complex, barrel-fermented, savory and complex styles - both underpinned by concentrated fruit and powerful acid structure.

In terms of producers, the members of the old guard are in fine form and continue to improve as experience and resources to enact change both combine effectively to maintain a leading role.

But the really exciting thing about the region is the new wave, the questioning, capable and determined army of winemakers that are exploring previously unexplored varieties (Teroldego, Nebbiolo, Trousseau) and also making stylistic advances into the conservative territories of chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and dry white blends.

These girls and guys are making some seriously great wines. Fresh eyes cast across this rugged coastal region are fuelling wines of impressive vitality, soulful appeal and high quality.

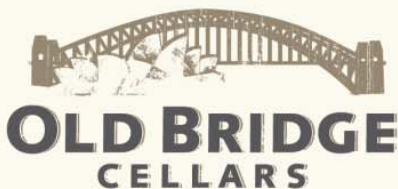
This is a region in full stride. Enjoy the reviews.

#### **97 pts Leeuwin Estate Art Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2012**

This is the Mouton-Rothschild of Australia. Incredibly complex aromas of black currants, spice, cigar box and berry. Full body, fantastic palate with round and polished tannins. Goes for minutes.

#### **96 pts Cullen Vanya Cabernet Sauvignon 2012**

A new addition to the range, this is a biodynamic cabernet with a small tweak of petit verdot (3%) that has a beautiful sense of richness, balance and harmony. The nose is swathed in ripe blackberry and dark cherry fruit aromas, blueberry too; impeccably ripe. The palate has silky, long and velvet-like texture, superb mid-palate richness and blueberry fruit flavor. Long, shimmering tannin finish. Releases long and effortless; drink now or keep for 15+ years.



**95 pts Cullen Diana Madeline 2013**

Pretty, floral and fragrant; very bright and perfumed cabernet wine. There is little oak, fine red berry fruits on offer and a sappy, distinctly herbal and leafy note too, plus gravel and earth. The palate is superfine, bright and finely tannined. Crunchy, bright and lighter, but has power though. Needs time.

**95 pts Leeuwin Estate Art Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2011**

This is really a gorgeous bottle with subtle black currant, berry, spice, chocolate and cedar undertones. Full body, integrated tannins and a long and beautiful finish. So perfect now.

**95 pts Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay 2012**

A wine with amazing richness and depth. So much apple pie character yet minerally underneath. Full body, so much length. Gorgeous.

**94 pts Cullen Mangan East Block 2013**

The purity and beauty to this is exceptional. Full-bodied, extremely velvety and fine. Wow. Petit verdot and malbec.

**94 pts Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay 2013**

Fabulous flamboyance and opulence yet a freshness and brightness underneath. Full body, lemon curd, apple meringue undertones. Vibrant finish.

**93 pts Cullen Margaret River Cullen Vineyard 2014**

A complex and layered wine that has seen partial barrel fermentation and is showing a wealth of lime and lemon citrus plus some gentle tropical fruits and laid back nutty complexity. The palate is smooth, supple and even; really neatly struck complexity in terms of texture. Nectarine and lemon fruit flavors sit fresh, full of charm.

**93 pts Cullen Sauvignon Blanc Semillon Cullen Vineyard 2014**

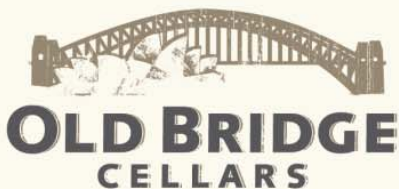
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**93 pts Cullen Semillon Sauvignon Blanc Mangan Vineyard 2014**

A very neat lime and lemon citrus nose on offer with this semillon-driven blend that makes for a refreshing young wine that really trades on fruit crunch and punch. The palate has a chalky texture, plus really smoothly stated acidity that helps hold lemon flavors long into the finish.

**92 pts Cullen Amber 2014**

A blend of roughly two-thirds semillon and one-third sauvignon blanc, this has been fermented on skins, with minimal interference in the winemaking process. Gentle oak warmth here, running through ripe citrus and papaya fruit. Acidity runs through the finish, really gentle, lots of charm.



**92 pts Leeuwin Estate Prelude Vineyards Cabernet Merlot 2011**

A delicious and polished blend that really captures the ripeness of the vintage without compromising on freshness and poise. Mid-weight, full of red berry and cassis fruits, gently leafy; tannins run fine and even. Beautiful balance here, drink now.

**92 pts Leeuwin Estate Prelude Vineyards Chardonnay 2014**

Bright ripe melon and other tropical fruits, peaches too. Gently nutty, complex and stylish wine. The palate is richly flavored, and acidity drives weighty Margaret River chardonnay texture.

**92 pts Leeuwin Estate Art Series Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2012**

A more sophisticated wine that still trades on pristine fruit and the semillon makes more of an impact with grassy lemon-tinged fruit; some flinty nuances here too. The palate is savory and evenhanded; there's ripe white peach and lime citrus flavor here.

**91 pts Leeuwin Estate Prelude Vineyards Cabernet Merlot 2012**

A classically styled wine that is tailored for instant appeal and drinkability. This is balanced and silky with beautiful fruit and harmony.

**91 pts Leeuwin Estate Art Series Riesling 2014**

A bright lime and lemon-scented nose here, with lovely fragrant citrus and gentle crushed stony notes too. The palate has impeccably pure and evenhanded style, plus crunchy acidity; melon and lime cooler flavors run the distance. Drink now, or age with confidence for up to 8 years.

**91 pts Leeuwin Estate Siblings Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2014**

Beautifully fresh and floral lime citrus and peachy fruits as well, this has a sweet scent of fresh herbs like Thai basil too. The palate is crisp and crunchy, neat and even; there's a smooth core of supple flesh. Easygoing and very approachable.