

## Australia, Western Australia: Happy 50<sup>th</sup>, Margaret River!

Joe Czerwinski  
The Wine Advocate | December 29, 2017

I hope the good folks in Swan Valley, Pemberton, Mount Barker and the like will forgive me for this focus on Margaret River, which celebrated the 50th anniversary of commercial wine-grape plantings there in 2017.

Building on the visit of UC Davis professor Harold Olmo in the 1950s, who suggested that parts of southwestern WA would be suitable for grape growing, John Gladstones, a lupin researcher with an interest in wine, published papers in 1965 and 1966 touting Margaret River as perhaps being even better for grapes than Mount Barker.

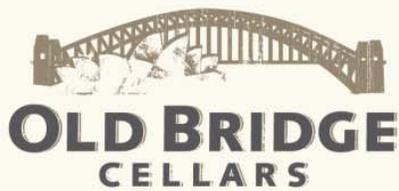
There was a bit of local controversy over whether 1966 or 1967 was the appropriate birth year for the region, but the claim for the 1967 plantings by Perth-based cardiologist Tom Cullity at what is now Vasse Felix seems to have won out. Other early pioneers in Margaret River include Moss Wood and Cullen, followed soon thereafter by Woodlands, Cape Mentelle and Leeuwin Estate.

The Margaret River region is actually a wide, shallow peninsula that sticks out into the Indian Ocean. Its southern end is lapped by the Southern Ocean, which creates a temperature gradient from the cooler south to the warmer north. The longest-established vineyards lie toward the center of the continuum, in the subregion of Wilyabrup, now highly regarded for Cabernet Sauvignon. Chardonnay production has, generally speaking, moved south, into cooler regions.

Margaret River represents only something like 2.3% of all wine produced in Australia, but it accounts for a vast majority of the trophy-winning Cabernets and Chardonnays in the Australian national wine show system. Despite the show system's shortcomings, it does provide some measure of how good the region's wines can be.

The region itself hosts two wine-bucket-list events each year. The Cape Mentelle International Cabernet Tasting and the Cullen Wines International Chardonnay Tasting are blind tastings of a single vintage of 20 or more of the world's top wines. The 2017 versions of these events featured 2014 Cabernets and 2013 Chardonnays, with commentary by prominent international wine critics, including the likes of Jancis Robinson, James Halliday and yours truly.

Some of my personal favorite Cabernets were the Spottswoode (Napa Valley), Château Mouton-Rothschild (Pauillac) and Xanadu Reserve (Margaret River). Ornellaia and Sassicaia, two of my



top wines from last year's 2013 tasting, were notably lackluster, while the 2014 Bordeaux picked up the slack.

At the Chardonnay tasting, my top wines included Penfolds Yattarna (mostly Tasmanian), Oakridge 864 Funder and Diamond Vineyard Drive Block (Yarra Valley) and Cullen's new Kevin John Legacy Series Flower Day (Margaret River). On this day, I found the Burgundies seemed a bit disjointed (Blain-Gagnard's Bâtard-Montrachet) or simple (Leroy's Meursault Perrières).

Back to the locals, Margaret River Cabernets are rarely the biggest, richest wines in any lineup. They're medium-bodied and typically suave and streamlined, blending distinctive sage and bay leaf notes into their cherry and cassis flavors. Extraction and oak levels tend to be moderate, with balance at an early age being more important than power and longevity.

It's a similar story with Chardonnay, although I think there's more variation. Some producers are reaching far south, looking for higher acids and leaner styles, while others are happy to make plump, more approachable and succulent wines.

Margaret River continues to turn out a bevy of Sauvignon Blancs, Semillons and various blends thereof, but only a few of them are really impressive. Most are relatively herbaceous, crisp whites of moderate appeal. Shiraz can be good, but too often it's treated as something that "we make, because there are always cellar-door visitors from the eastern states who ask for it." Yes, that's an actual quote.

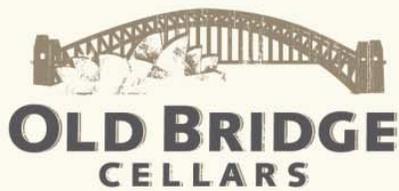
#### CULLEN WINES

##### **97 pts Cullen Kevin John Chardonnay**

Always one of Australia's finest Chardonnays, the 2015 Kevin John Chardonnay doesn't disappoint. Despite being completely barrel-fermented and aged in 73% new French oak, the toast element is minimal, the wood serving mainly to enhance the medium-bodied wine's textural qualities and amplify the fruit. Refined notes of white peaches and citrus weave in and out, starting quietly but growing in elegant intensity as the wine progresses across the palate, finishing dry, silky and savory on the nearly endless finish.

##### **94 pts Cullen Ephraim Clarke Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2016**

The barrel-fermented 2016 Ephraim Clarke Sauvignon Blanc Semillon is a 76-24 blend of the two varieties, favoring Sauvignon Blanc. This wine epitomizes the class and elegance achievable with these varieties within Margaret River. The oak adds subtle notes of toasted grain and nuts, the citrusy fruit is rounded and discrete rather than glaringly loud and the long finish leaves behind a silky longing for another sip. A really fine effort.



**94 pts Cullen Diana Madeline 2015**

Despite exhibiting a bit of youthful austerity, the 2015 Diana Madeline should mature into an exemplary representation of Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon (there's 11% Merlot, 1% Malbec and 1% Cabernet Franc in the blend). It's classic Bordeaux in style, meaning it's medium-bodied and streamlined and framed by firm but ripe tannins. Cassis fruit forms the core, although hints of cedar oak, pressed flowers and dried herbs add considerable nuance, picking up notes of chocolate on the taut, lingering finish. It's an early candidate for Cabernet Sauvignon of the vintage in Margaret River.

**91 pts Cullen Ephraim Clarke Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2015**

The 2015 Ephraim Clarke Sauvignon Blanc Semillon is close to a 3:1 ratio of Sauvignon Blanc to Sémillon. Partially barrel-fermented and aged, it shows hints of toast and lemon curd on the nose and palate, a delicate feel on the medium-bodied palate and a long, silky finish tinged with vanilla.

LEEUWIN ESTATE

**96 pts Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay 2014**

One of Margaret River's (and Australia's) iconic Chardonnays, Leeuwin's 2014 Art Series Chardonnay continues that proud tradition. Never shy on toasty, nutty oak or bold fruit, the 2014 features both seamlessly woven together in perhaps greater harmony than in past vintages. Hints of white peach, Bosc pear and citrus appear on the medium-bodied palate and linger on the elegant, finely textured finish.

**92 pts Leeuwin Estate Art Series Cabernet Sauvignon 2013**

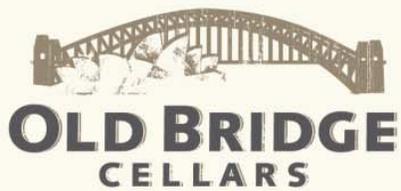
Leeuwin's 2013 Art Series Cabernet Sauvignon may be the best version of this wine I've ever tasted. It manages to be ripe and rich while still being svelte and medium-bodied. Baking spices and cedar appear on the nose, but this isn't an oaky wine—those elements are just seasoning for the red and black currant fruit. A creamy, slightly lactic note builds the mid-palate without adding excess weight, while hints of sage and bay leaf linger on the silky finish.

**91 pts Leeuwin Estate Prelude Vineyards Chardonnay 2015**

Vintage variation aside, the quality of this wine has been on the upswing. The 2015 Prelude Vineyards Chardonnay may be the finest yet released, offering toasted grain seamlessly integrated with layers of stone fruit and pineapple. It's medium to full-bodied yet doesn't seem heavy or alcoholic, instead giving the impression of ripe fruit and restrained opulence. It's finally come into its own as a worthy (if still lesser) companion to the Art Series Chardonnay.

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

Shiraz isn't considered the strongest variety in Margaret River, but Leeuwin's 2014 Art Series Shiraz is an attractive berry and violet-scented wine, with hints of cracked pepper and bay leaf adding complexity to the silky-textured, medium-bodied Shiraz. The crisp, tangy finish brings cranberries to mind. It should drink well for 7-8 years.



**89 pts** Leeuwin Estate Siblings Sauvignon Blanc Semillon 2016

The 2016 Siblings Sauvignon Blanc Semillon features delicate notes of tomato leaf alongside hints of white currants and grapefruit. It's medium-bodied, with a certain plump succulence to the mid-palate and a long, grassy finish. It should drink well for another few years.

