



RUNNING its course

It may only be a few decades since Australia's Margaret River was first planted, but as *Stephen Brook* writes, an artisanal passion for fine wine is already deeply rooted



australia: margaret river

Margaret River wines into Bordeaux or Burgundy. The idea behind the tasting is not to show that the Western Australian wines are better than those from Europe, but to demonstrate that they are of comparable quality and structure and to confirm what many wine-lovers have known for a long time: that Margaret River is capable of producing world-class wines. Its Pinot Noir, Merlot, and Shiraz are rarely exceptional, but the Chardonnays and Cabernets can be more than outstanding.

UNIQUE SETTING

The explanation is largely climatic. The Margaret River region juts into the ocean like an envelope, with the cool seas on three sides. It's 100 kilometres from top to bottom, with significant variations in microclimates between north and south. The finest regions would seem to be Wilyabrup to the north of the town of Margaret River, and Wallcliffe just to the south, whereas Karridale in the far south is cooler and best suited to Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. A low ridge of hills protects the vineyards from ocean storms, but winter rainfall can be plentiful, so it's unusual for the vines to suffer from water deficit. Frost is rare. In short, Margaret River offers a near ideal climate for growing wine grapes.

Most of those who bought land here and planted vineyards in the late 1960s and early 1970s were doctors and businessmen based in the regional capital of Perth, a three-hour drive to the north of

Feature findings

- > Margaret River is famous for its Chardonnays and Cabernets, as blind tastings alongside some of the world's top pours confirms.
- > The region was planted in the 1960s and '70s by wine-loving professionals encouraged by reports that the region boasts a climate similar to Bordeaux.
- > An upturn in tourism and hosting cultural events has allowed the region to form a chic status that survives to this day.
- > Margaret River wines have been shown to age well, even when the wines produced today are much improved to the region's first bottlings.
- > Even so-called bargain offerings deliver on quality, sophistication and consistency.

Margaret River. They loved wine and were encouraged by a report prepared by Dr John Gladstones in 1965, suggesting that the region's climate had in much in common with Bordeaux. The doctors were not primarily planting as an investment opportunity; nor was there any significant presence of large corporations or investment funds that were such an important feature in South Australia's vineyards. Moreover, their hunch that Margaret River had the potential to make first-rate wines, white as well as red, was rapidly proved right. By the mid-1970s the wines had won recognition not just within Australia but in Britain and other countries. Inevitably, the larger Australian wine companies such as Southcorp and Hardys were quick to either plant their own

EACH NOVEMBER Australian winemakers and some international guests gather in Margaret River for the annual wine show, which is preceded by a fascinating blind tasting. Local wineries line up their wines against top pours from other parts of the world. So in 2012 Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignons were tasted against other Cabernets, and in 2013 their top Chardonnays were tasted alongside such esteemed white Burgundies as Corton-Charlemagne from Bonneau de Martray.

At these blind tastings, even experienced palates usually place some

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vineyards or to snap up existing wineries and estates. Yet, by-and-large, standards were maintained. Costs of production meant that Margaret River could never become a source of cheap wines jostling for position on supermarket shelves.

Despite its isolation, the region also benefitted from regular invasions of tourists, drawn here by its uncrowded beaches and opportunities for surfing. Artisans and potters also flocked here, and by the 1980s Margaret River had

become an extended resort. Most large wineries had good restaurants, and small hotels and spas opened to accommodate the growing number of visitors. Wineries such as Leeuwin hosted cultural events, especially concerts by some of the world's most popular singers. Margaret River, and its wines, became chic. Today it is even more fashionable, and each year sees new labels coming onto the market.

In the past some red wines from Margaret River could show a slight herbaceous quality, a confirmation of the region's cool climate, but exactly the same was true a few decades ago of fine wines from the Médoc. Today lower yields have largely eradicated any strong herbaceous character, but even so the Cabernets are rarely big, jammy wines on the Napa model. Indeed, they have the elegance typical of good Bordeaux. Exactly the same is true of the Chardonnays: they are racy and

intense, without the plumpness of many other New World Chardonnays. Yet they have considerable weight of fruit, even power, and can age well. Both Chardonnay and Semillon from Margaret River can easily age 10 or 12 years, though many consumers would prefer to drink them young for their freshness.

AGEING GRACEFULLY

If one of the criteria for establishing the seriousness of a wine is its capacity to age, then Margaret River reds as well as whites have no difficulty at all passing that test. Cullen Cabernets from the late 1970s and Moss Wood Cabernets from the early 1980s are still impressive decades later. Since these wines were made from

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vines no more than ten years old, their survival is remarkable. Perhaps they would have been even better five or ten years ago, but nonetheless the wines, though mature, have not faded. There is little doubt that the Cabernets being produced today at the top estates will age even better than those wines from the 1970s and 1980s.

Those founding wineries – Vasse Felix, Moss Wood, Cullen, Cape Mentelle, and Leeuwin – are still among the great names of the region. Indeed, many of the Margaret River pioneers – such as Denis Horgan of Leeuwin and Keith Mugford of

‘The region is extremely young, yet has already planted deep roots’

Moss Wood – are still active, though in some cases handing over management of their wineries to the next generation. This happened some time ago at Cullen, where Vanya Cullen took over from her parents at least a decade ago, converting the estate to biodynamic farming. Although there is considerable stability, there have also been significant changes of ownership: important wineries such as Cape Mentelle, Xanadu and Palandri (now called Three Oceans) have changed hands in recent years. And new properties have been created such as Rosily and Fraser Gallop. But in general the landscape at Margaret River has not changed radically over the past decade.

The speed with which Margaret River developed its vineyards and reputation is striking. It avoided the phase – which, for example, New Zealand went through – of

planting mediocre varieties before, after much trial and error, it realised its strength lay in Sauvignon, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir. From the outset the Margaret River pioneers planted the varieties for which it is still best known today. Good though the early vintages were, there is no doubt that the farming and winemaking today are more expert and consistent.

Keith Mugford of Moss Wood says: “I am not someone who looks back at the good old days. Quite the opposite. I know we make better wines in 2013 than we did when I arrived here in 1979 and that’s the way it should be. How would it reflect on us if we spent more than 30 years doing something without learning ways to improve it?” One clear difference is that the fruit is picked at higher ripeness levels. That does inevitably result in higher alcohol, but few wines seem over-alcoholic and thus unbalanced. The Margaret River climate doesn’t easily permit excesses, which is why the wines are so consistent.

QUALITY ON OFFER

The emphasis has always been on quality because the region is not well suited to mass production. There are other regions of Australia where a high degree of mechanisation permits high-volume wines of decent, if not exceptional, quality to be produced. There is some mechanisation in Margaret River, especially during harvest, but most vineyards are small and tend to be cultivated by hand. These labour costs account for the high prices of many of the wines, as well as the fact that Western Australia is an isolated area, so every item that’s needed – bottles, corks, filters – has to be shipped in and then the final wines need to be shipped out. It’s not difficult to do, but it is expensive.

If there is a bargain style in Margaret River it is probably the blend of

Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon that has found itself a natural home here. Semillon was a variety planted long ago in the region, and is made both in oaked and unoaked styles. A few wineries, such as Moss Wood, still make a pure Semillon. Almost every winery in Margaret River produces a Sauvignon/Semillon blend. It’s a style that has been associated with Margaret River for about three decades. The freshness and acidity of the Sauvignon blends beautifully with the fatter, richer Semillon fruit, and sometimes a proportion of the wine is fermented in oak to give more texture. These wines are rarely very expensive, but have the merit of charm and drinkability.

But the true strengths of Margaret River lie with Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Each important producer tends to have its own style, although this can change as winemakers come and go. Cullen’s wines have great concentration and structure; the Moss Wood Cabernets are more richly textured than some other reds from the region; Vasse Felix Chardonnays have a pure and crystalline quality; Fraser Gallop produces rather austere wines that are beautifully balanced and will age well; and Leeuwin’s Cabernet and Chardonnay both show considerable power and weight. Less well-known producers such as Juniper, Xanadu, and Howard Park are now regularly making wines of exceptional quality, both white and red.

The hallmark of Margaret River is consistency. The climate plays a large part in this, of course, but so does the human scale of the vineyards, which give the region an almost European atmosphere.

It’s the proliferation of family-owned properties, the passion for good food, and the exaltation of fine wine as a cultural, not just a commercial, asset. The region is extremely young, yet has already planted deep roots. ☐