

MOSS WOOD

Newsletter

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The 1998 Moss Wood Chardonnay

In its initial stages, the 1998 vintage in Margaret River was near perfect. The region experienced good dry conditions with warm though not excessive temperatures. This meant that the ripening process was consistent and quite rapid. Attacks from marauding birds were severe, but favourable ripening conditions meant that crops could be harvested quickly before too much harm was done. The lack of rain meant that the grapes were not threatened by disease nor was it likely that flavour would be diluted: the weight and generosity of the whites were guaranteed by these conditions.

Keith believes that dry vintages, even those which are too warm, are preferable to wet seasons. Although aware that it was a little too warm in the last three weeks before harvest, he points to 1996 and 1997 being great years in Burgundy because they were hot. And 1998 was certainly dry, at least until after the whites had been picked. There had been some initial problems. An indifferent budburst meant that the number of shoots per vine was down and so yield was lower than Keith would have liked. A minor outbreak of powdery mildew was contained as the vineyard team was able to get the spray program going before any losses occurred.



Although the quantities have doubled over the previous vintage, they are still well below expectation: about half of the tonnage achieved in 1995 and 1996. Still, the quality will be some compensation. (As an aside, Keith believes that 1999 will see a return to average yield for the Moss Wood Chardonnay. That's some relief.) The 1998 vintage reminded Keith of the 1994 but this Chardonnay should have greater concentration complexity than the wine from that harvest. He rates it better than the 1997, 1994 and 1992 though not the equal of the 1996, 1995, 1993 and 1990, as it lacks the finer texture and subtlety of those wines. Production followed accepted practice at Moss Wood. Picking commenced with the grapes a little riper than ideal, at 14° beaume (rather than Keith's preferred target of 13.5°). The grapes were crushed and pressed immediately, and allowed to settle for 48 hours. At this stage, the clear juice was racked off, with 2% of solids, into stainless steel tanks for the commencement of primary fermentation. Halfway through the ferment, the wine was pumped into barrels where it remained until this was completed. During this period, both in stainless steel tanks and barrels, battonage takes place. This is the practice of stirring the lees to produce a finer wine, one that shows better integration of fruit and oak. After the finish of fermentation, battonage takes place once a week until after the wine has gone through a partial malolactic. From this point on, the lees remain

The 1998 Moss Wood Chardonnay (cont.)

undisturbed. The wine remained in almost 100% new French oak for eleven months. It was then protein stabilised, cold stabilised and bottled. Keith had only used new oak for the Chardonnay since 1987 and decided to include a couple of one year old barrels as an experiment. He wasn't satisfied with the results and will only be using new barrels from 1999 on.

The 1998 Moss Wood Margaret River Chardonnay shows ripe fruit aromatics with hints of smokey oak; rich, ripe peach flavours with marmalade, citrus and grapefruit notes as well as some caramel, butterscotch and smokey bacon characters; the finish is crisp and clean with lingering toasty oak. It is a fresh, complex white that shows generosity of fruit yet is tightly structured. The 1998 Chardonnay reminds Keith of the warmth and sweetness of a ripe year like 1994 but it has a firmer structure. He believes that it is an opulent wine which has the fruit intensity, alcohol and acidity to age with confidence in a good cellar for ten years.

The 1999 Vintage at Moss Wood

There was barely suppressed excitement among the Margaret River winemakers about the very good growing season that the region had experienced. Mild summer temperatures meant that the crop had ripened steadily, and without heat stress. Fabulous marri gum blossom meant that pressure from birds was non-existent. At Moss Wood the vineyards looked fantastic, with vines in great shape and showing no moisture problems. It was all so good that no-one was prepared to say anything. Keith felt that the season reminded him of the great years: 1980, 1990 and 1996. The quantity appeared about average but the quality looked to be superb.

Sampling, in the lead up to harvest suggested that the grapes showed a lovely depth of fruit flavour. The semillon, for example, showed tropical fruit and lychee flavours at 9° beaume. These flavours do not normally develop until much later. Keith comments that in most years there is significant flavour variation in individual berry tasting; some will be flat, some moderately intense and so on. This year, he reports that for the first time in his experience, there was consistency of flavour intensity throughout the vineyard.

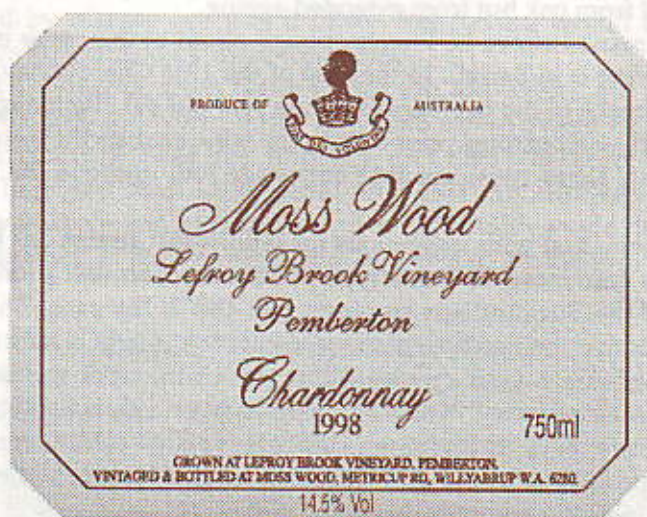
To this point, the harvest confirms its early promise with the pinot noir, chardonnay and semillon safely in the winery. In Keith's view, the semillon is possibly the best ever, with the chardonnay not far behind. The situation with the pinot is unusual: there are fewer but bigger bunches and although these lack colour density, there is amazing fruit intensity in the juice and attractive spicy aromatics. About 30mm of rain fell in March (nothing compared to last year!) and was not serious. There was no dilution of flavour or any disease. As this is written, Keith is waiting on the cabernet which is promising as much as the other varieties.

Moss Wood Chardonnay Vintage Chart

Vintage	Harvest Date		° Beaume	pH	Yield (tonnes/ha)	Vintage Rating (out of 10)
1983	18	February	12.6	3.28	8.7	7
1984	29	February	13.1	3.41	7.73	8
1985	22	February	12.5	3.24	8.44	7
1986	26	February	12.9	3.34	9.1	7
1987	24	February	12.9	3.29	10.13	8
1988	12	February	12.5	3.35	11.2	7
1989	20	February	12.9	3.41	7.82	7+
1990	6	March	12.9	3.24	6.85	10
1991	25	March	12.8	3.48	6.36	8
1992	27	February	13.5	3.35	7.3	8+
1993	4	March	13.6	3.35	10.29	10
1994	28	February	13.6	3.49	9.0	9
1995	17	February	13.7	3.30	7.0	10
1996	20	February	13.2	3.39	9.0	9+
1997	7	March	13.6	3.45	2.58	9
1998	5	March	14.1	3.53	4.08	9

The 1998 Moss Wood 'Lefroy Brook' Chardonnay

This is Moss Wood's second year of producing chardonnay from Pat and Barbara Holt's Pemberton vineyard, 'Lefroy Brook'. This is situated south-east of Pemberton on the road to Northcliffe, near the Cascades – a tourist landmark and a place of remarkable beauty. The Holt's vineyard is alongside the Pemberton to Northcliffe train line and is surrounded by National Park so the entire vineyard is permanently netted. It was planted, using the traditional French vine spacing of one metre by one metre, in 1982 and 1983 so the vines are now mature. This unirrigated, low yielding vineyard is producing grapes of exceptional quality. Keith Mugford makes the Lefroy Brook wine using identical techniques to those he uses to produce the Margaret River Chardonnay. The wine reveals its Pemberton origins in a number of ways. It is slightly lower in alcohol and its fruit flavours are at the citrus end of the spectrum: lemon, lime with some nutty, cashewy characters and attractive toasty oak. The Lefroy Brook Chardonnay is a clear expression of its distinct fruit characters: there is a sharpness of focus on the fruit rather than on complexity and subtlety as occurs with the Margaret River wine. At present, the Lefroy Brook looks oakier than its Margaret River counterpart from the 1998 vintage. It will benefit from another six months bottle ageing during which time the fruit and oak will become more completely integrated and the oak will no longer appear to dominate.



The 1998 Moss Wood Lefroy Brook Chardonnay shows attractive toasty oak aromas on the nose and has an opulence and generosity of ripe fruit which lingers. It is intense yet fine with a light, elegant palate and lively lime and citrus characters. Although it has undergone a full malolactic fermentation it has quite a bracing acidity: fresh, crisp and clean with a nutty aftertaste. Keith believes that although there is little history, the chemistry and complex flavours of the wine suggest it should develop some interesting secondary characters and reward cellaring for at least five years. *The Age's* 'Epicure' section rated the 1997 vintage among Australia's top 50 chardonnays in a recent article by Ralph Kyte Powell and Jeni Port.

Village Cellars – Japan – Leeuwin

Following their trip to Japan last year, Clare and Keith were pleased to receive a visit from Yoshiko Nakamura and Richard Cohen, owners of *Village Cellars*, the Moss Wood importers. The Moss Wood crew enjoyed a marvellous lunch with several of Richard's and Yoshiko's clients, who had made the journey to attend the Leeuwin Estate Concert and explore the Margaret River viticultural region. One of the Japanese ladies was obsessed with Australian Rules Football and was even more impressed when Matt Bowden explained how well he plays it! It is wonderful to see Matthew doing his bit for international relations. Richard and Yoshiko also produced photos of Keith and Clare reading Japanese poetry in traditional dress at the Takaoka Rice Harvest Festival. Keith is only sorry that the pictures were not of a quality to be used in this newsletter. They have caused much hilarity and are worth seeing on a visit to Moss Wood!

Clare and Keith were also fortunate enough to be invited to join the Village Cellars group at the Leeuwin Concert. What an evening! Yvonne Kenny and Bryn Terfel were fantastic, the setting was perfect and the dinner afterwards was sumptuous, especially considering 1,700 all sat down together! This event is a showpiece for our region. Congratulations to Tricia and Dennis Horgan – a stunning success.

White Wine Experimentation at Moss Wood

Readers may note the reference to old and new oak in the Chardonnay. It is part of the continuing review of our winemaking methods and wine styles. The motivation for re-visiting the use of one year old barrels comes from Keith's work in France during the 1997 vintage. Whilst we had tried and then discarded the concept more than ten years ago, it seemed to be worth trying again. The major difference between new and one year old barrels is in the intensity of primary fruit characters that results. The new barrels produce citrus-like aromas while the one year old oak brings out very strong grapefruit notes with a leaner structure and a hole at the back of the palate. So, by comparison, wine from the older barrel shows a lack of balance. The new oak adds toasty flavours and length, enhances mid-palate sweetness and gives the wine a higher level of tannins. In the finished wine, this helps to highlight the primary fruit characters. Even though the difference is minimal, Keith believes that in order to continue the Moss Wood style and to ensure the drinkability of the Chardonnay, he has no choice but to favour the contribution of new oak. There is not so much difference between new and one year old oak with the Chardonnay from Pemberton which has finer texture and lighter fruit than the wine produced from the Margaret River home vineyard. Using one year old oak might work if the Chardonnay were to be aged in barrel for longer than twelve months. In this case, more lees and toasty character might develop, not from oak but from extended ageing.

A variable that Keith doesn't believe he knows enough about at this stage is the influence of battonage (stirring the lees while the wine is in barrel). In the case of the 1998 Chardonnay, he feels that battonage has helped smooth over the influence of the two barrels of one year old oak. Battonage has been used to improve the quality of fermentation. Re-suspending yeast cells in the wine enables the fermentation to proceed to zero sugar level with greater ease. Keith considers that battonage will improve the mouthfeel of the wine and enhance its toasty character.

A great deal of experimentation with indigenous (or wild) yeast strains has been done at Moss Wood in the past few years. Keith is convinced that this type of fermentation will produce a more complex wine. Certainly the experience of the Burgundians suggests that this is the case. There can, however, be some problems. The major worry is that the outcome of the fermentation is largely left to chance, because it is not possible to predict beforehand which yeast species will carry out the work and whether they will be capable of finishing their job. With selected yeast strains, the fermentation characteristics are already known. Also, accumulation of 'off' characters (such as hydrogen sulphide, volatile acidity and sulphur dioxide) can take place. Alternatively, on the positive side, the aromatics may contain subliminal earthy, truffle aromas which can be seen as making the wine more complex.

Keith believes that it is possible to achieve positive gains with indigenous yeasts by using them in the initial stages of the fermentation process. When this happens attractive and unusual aromatics are encouraged and the body and texture of the wine are enhanced. In 1998, Keith inoculated the ferment at significantly lower rates than usual, so that wild yeasts could play their part early on, before being overwhelmed by the more virulent selected strains. This approach provides some complexity but with less risk. The same effect can also be achieved by a sequential inoculation, where a large dose of a selected strain is introduced after a set period to complete the process the indigenous yeasts have started.

The Fledgeling Web Site and E-mail

Work continues at www.mosswood.com.au. At present the site is graced by Philip Cook's watercolour of Willyabrup but we expect to soon display our first seasonal shots of the vineyard and its various activities at harvest time. The new shots, courtesy of Barry and Jude Lepley, should be up by mid-April. Our plan is to give people a chance to see what our vineyard and winery look like, especially for those who are too far away to have a chance to visit us in person. We hope you like it!

For all recent customers on our mailing list, a reminder. The Moss Wood newsletter and order form can be received via e-mail. If you wish to have them sent to your e-mail address instead of your postal address, please complete your details on the order form, being careful to clearly show upper and lower case letters as necessary, or contact the Moss Wood office on-line at our address shown below.

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