

MOSS WOOD



Newsletter

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The 1996 Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon

It's a pretty big call, when Keith Mugford says that this is the best wine he's made. Made following a copybook growing season which featured plenty of spring rains and no extremes of heat during summer, Keith ranks the vintage overall with 1990 and 1980 and better than 1985 and 1991. In terms of the wine's ripeness, it is better than the 1991 and on a par with 1995. Problems with birds meant that it was not a trouble free vintage. While all varieties were damaged, the cabernet sauvignon was particularly affected. Sorting was necessary to see that the quality of the wines was not diminished. Beautiful autumnal weather with clear sunny days during harvest gave the team at Moss Wood much to be happy about. As this was to be the first Moss Wood Cabernet made in the style of the reserve, the near perfect vintage was regarded as a most propitious sign.

The grapes were picked, crushed, destemmed and tipped into open tanks seeded with pure yeast culture. The juice remained on skins for an average of 8 days and for at least 24 hours after the wine had passed 0° baume. During this time, the tanks were plunged at least three times a day. Fermentation temperatures are relatively high (up to 30°C) and each batch is pumped over once towards the end of fermentation to improve colour and blow off any lingering hydrogen sulphide.



14.0% Vol

As Moss Wood now has the luxury of more fermentation space, Keith is able to keep the Cabernet on skins for 3 or 4 days after fermentation has finished. In doing this he is seeking to ameliorate the tannins. Time on skins can remove furry tannins and soften and improve the definition and balance of tannins. There is a point beyond which there is no improvement in this softening process. Keith tastes daily to look for the point at which improvement ceases. The grapes are then pressed with all pressings being included in the wine.

This is then allowed to settle in stainless steel tanks and left on its gross lees until after the malolactic fermentation is completed. After that it is put into barrel – 50% in new French oak and 50% in two and three year old barrels – where it is kept for two years. The ways in which the Reserve style differs from the traditional Moss Wood Cabernet are that the wine is given two years in barrel (rather than 18 months); and 12 (rather than 6) months bottle maturation before release. This allows the development of some complex features of cabernet sauvignon – tar and smoky characters – while the wine is in oak. It also means that the Cabernet will lose some of its fresh fruit flavours without adversely affecting the wine. The additional time in bottle enables it to avoid bottle shock and any problems associated with handling it. Keith believes that

The 1996 Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon (cont.)

these two changes underpin a step up in quality and takes the vineyard to a new level. He hopes that this will enhance Moss Wood's reputation as a quality producer.

The Moss Wood history dating back to 1980 has shown that the Reserve wines become more complex. Special Reserve wines have been released in small quantities from the 1980, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1991 and 1994 vintages. Although the Pannells before them and the Mugfords all believed that the Reserve style was worth pursuing, the additional expense involved in keeping the wine for an extra twelve months has made its production prohibitive. The present move has been funded by Keith and Clare and has represented a significant drain on their financial resources. Firstly, it has involved moving from a two to a three year production cycle. This involves a substantial rise in the valuation of Moss Wood stocks of wine and represents an additional annual tax impost. (It's not easy finding money to pay tax on a wine that's not yet been sold.) There has also been the need to fund an extra year's production without having a Cabernet to sell (and cabernet represents half of the Moss Wood volume).

The 1996 Moss Wood Cabernet has ripe mulberry, redcurrant aromas with some violet overtones and hints of earthy, tarry, smoky characters. The palate is supple and fleshy with mulberry, redcurrant, chocolate, coffee bean and smoky oak flavours: it is rich and concentrated with a tight structure and strong, fine though firmish, tannins. This is a bold, complex and powerful red that has impressive weight, a velvety texture, and a long, dry finish. It will improve over the next ten years but, well cellared, will live for much longer.

The 1999 Vintage

As reported in the previous Moss Wood Newsletter, the 1999 vintage produced fabulous semillon, perhaps the best ever in Keith's opinion. At the time, we commented that about 10mm of rain in mid March was nothing serious. The team started to worry just a little as the rain continued to fall. However, their fears turned out to be unfounded as the falls peaked at 25mm. This rain slowed the ripening of the cabernet a little, the only grapes that had not then been picked at Moss Wood. What saved the day was the stubborn Moss Wood mindset and Keith's belief that Moss Wood Cabernet is always ripe. So picking was delayed in the hope that the rains would stop. The fact that there was no pressure from birds made the team more relaxed about waiting. The first cabernet was picked on March 31st at 13 beaume. Although satisfied with the quality, Keith decided to wait before picking any more. There followed two weeks of uncharacteristically warm weather with temperatures in the high 20s which ripened the cabernet fabulously. When it did ripen, it did so quickly and there was a touch of panic as the beaume shot into the high 13s. So the rest of the cabernet was brought in quickly. Certainly, this was a vintage for the patient. Those who did wait were rewarded by a cabernet harvest to rival the best in Margaret River. Keith expects the wine to rival those made in 1980, 1985, 1990 and 1996. Something to look forward to.

Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon Vintage Chart

Vintage	Harvest Date	° Beaume	Yield (tonnes/ha)	Vintage Rating (out of 10)
1983	7 March	13.0	9.0	9
1984	12 March	12.3	9.0	8
1985	13 March	12.5	7.5	9
1986	14 March	12.8	5.8	9
1987	26 March	12.7	8.5	9
1988	10 March	13.0	7.1	7
1989	30 March	13.2	7.9	7+
1990	2 April	12.8	8.5	10
1991	3 April	13.3	9.8	10
1992	26 March	12.8	10.0	8
1993	22 March	13.2	8.5	8+
1994	25 March	12.8	8.89	9
1995	14 March	13.6	9.75	10
1996	14 March	13.7	10.0	10
1997	19 March	13.6	7.0	9
1998	30 March	13.5	10.0	8+
1999	31 March	13.8	9.22	9+

The Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon Vintage Chart

This chart has been revised following a vertical tasting of Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon from 1986 – 1996 conducted by Keith Mugford with wholesaler, Tucker Seabrook. The earlier vintages mentioned have been tasted in the previous twelve months.

1980 (Special Reserve) A wonderfully opulent red with great concentration of flavour: intense, deep, long. It has power, balance and finesse and is drinking superbly. A class above the earlier wines from the vineyard because of the liveliness of its fruit.

1983 (Special Reserve) Soft, approachable, ripe, rich, concentrated mulberry and blackcurrants with some earthy overtones, complex, powerful, yet more elegant than the standard wine. The tannins continue to soften but are still noticeable. Still not quite ready to drink.

1983 Dense, ripe, vibrant mulberry, plum and chocolate flavours with some underlying earthiness. Initially soft; rich and concentrated; still tight; big tannin structure. Needs time.

1984 Restrained on nose; soft, earthy, chocolate and smoky oak flavours with the primary fruit characters quite subdued. Lacking the intensity of most years, with only moderate ripeness but with good weight, balance, length and pleasing complexity. Matured.

1985 Drinking at its peak where it should remain for some time. Soft, round and fleshy with a velvety texture; quite mellow; opulent, ripe cherry, blackcurrant flavours with overtones of coffee and earthiness; complex, incredibly dense; seamless integration of fruit and oak.

1986 Now moving into the mature stage with some restrained tarry, smoky characters. Ripe but with earthy, chocolatey, coffee notes. Velvety texture, still with a tight structure, but with a much softer finish than previously. (One bottle opened did appear quite tannic.)

1987 Perhaps the most herbaceous of all Moss Wood Cabernets and now looking a bit out of style. Dense, brooding aromas of briary oak, herbal and leafy notes and smoky, cigar box overtones. Powerful with impressive weight, a velvety texture, great length of flavour and gentle fine tannins.

1988 Spicy red berry aromas, fresh, soft and quite lively, with attractive red berry and smoky oak flavours. Drinking well showing good weight and balance though with less power and concentration than in the best years.

1989 Smoky, tarry aromas dominate the nose as the wine slips into maturity. Much better on the palate, it is soft and round with a fleshy texture, red berry and mulberry flavours and some earthy, smoky notes. Tight still with fine, more supple tannins than before.

1990 Closed on the nose; powerful with massive weight and intensity of fruit flavour restrained by its tight structure. Opulent, ripe, generous redcurrant, mulberry and smoky oak characters. Its velvety texture, neat balanced, seamless integration of fruit and oak and great complexity suggest great promise. The tightness and firm tannins call for patience.

1991 In brilliant shape. Intense, vibrant, rich, ripe and bold flavours: raspberry, mulberry and cedary oak with chocolatey notes. Well-balanced with seamless integration of fruit and oak, fine yet with great concentration and power. Velvety texture. More forward than most yet 5 to 10 years from its best.

1992 Opened nicely. Restrained on the nose but with ripe mulberry, red berry and earthy, smoky oak flavours, all well integrated. Supple, silky texture. Attractive wine lacking the fruit intensity of most Moss Wood Cabernets.

1993 Pretty aromatics redolent of redcurrant and violets, rich, ripe redcurrant and red cherry characters neatly integrated with cedary oak. Quite fleshy; finer in texture than most and lacking the intensity of the best vintages.

1994 The first of a trio of outstanding vintages. Ripe redcurrant and blackberry flavours with subtle cedary oak and attractive sweet fruit on the mid-palate. The wine has a silky texture, impressive power and concentration of flavour and a long tannin structure. Needs time.

1995 Still showing vibrant youthful ripe fruit characters: mulberries, raspberries and violets which are seamlessly integrated with the lightly charred oak. It is generous, fleshy and supple, is neatly balanced, tightly structured, immensely powerful and has strong fine tannins. Moss Wood at its best.

The Last Cabernet Sauvignon Plantings?

The last two hectares of good viticultural land suitable for cabernet, an extension of the old block, will be planted in September 1999. Most of this will be cabernet sauvignon with some cabernet franc (4%) and petit verdot (4%) – to maintain the ratio which they contribute to the Moss Wood Cabernet. Keith comments that two to three hundred years ago, petit verdot was the dominant variety in Bordeaux as it could successfully ripen in any vintage. Now it has difficult ripening and so it constitutes a much smaller proportion of the wines of that region. At Moss Wood, petit verdot ripens between 10 to 14 days later than cabernet sauvignon. Although this variety has twice the acid of cabernet ('Enough to use in a car battery' quips Keith), its redeeming features are ink black colour and the extraordinary wild berry, truffle character that it contributes to the blend. Keith doesn't see a major role for merlot in the Moss Wood Cabernet as it has sufficient fruit weight and fleshiness for the wine to be enjoyable without this popular variety. If he were making Moss Wood Cabernet in the southern part of the Margaret River region, Keith believes he would use at least 10% merlot. The first crop from the new cabernet block is due in 2003 and fruit from there won't be marketed as part of the Moss Wood Cabernet until 2006. Keith estimates these two hectares will produce about 15 tonnes of grapes (roughly 1000 cases of Moss Wood) bringing production to a ceiling of 4000 cases in good years.

The Wine Magazine puts Moss Wood Cabernet in Australia's Top 5

The panel of Max Allen, Peter Bourne, Andrew Caillard, Peter Forrestal Huon Hooke, Lyndey Milan and Jeremy Oliver tasted the latest vintage of the country's 32 best cabernets as part of the process of determining the Top 20. They then tasted one or more older vintages to help provide a historic context and a backdrop for the panelists' own knowledge of the wines. They rated the Moss Wood with Cullen Cabernet Merlot, Penfolds Bin 707, Mount Mary Cabernets and Wynn's Black Label as the best five Australian cabernets.

Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon, Margaret River, WA. Another single-estate Margaret River cabernet, produced by the fastidious Keith Mugford. Moss Wood was the first in the region to attract cult status with Cabernet. The vines are mature and low-yielding, the quality of soil allowing them to thrive unwatered in the dry summer climate. Like Cullen, Mugford has decided to cease bottling a Reserve wine and instead elevate the standard wine to reserve quality, with extra time in oak. The 1995 is darkly coloured and thick, with great concentration and richness, no hint of the regional herbaceousness but complex gamy, meaty and toasted oak bouquet. Has the hallmark Moss Wood fleshiness, wrote Huon Hooke.

Inky, concentrated; has the fruit to balance its toasty oak character, said Bourne.

Silky, velvety texture; a lovely drink in the long term, said Oliver.

Mapping Margaret River

Keith Mugford and Vanya Cullen are involved in putting together a major tasting of the region's wines on the October weekend of the Langton's Classic Wines of Western Australia Auction. At this stage, it looks as though all of the 1999 cabernets from the Margaret River will be tasted in an attempt to see the impact of different vineyards and sub-regions on wine styles. While there has long been anecdotal evidence of such sub-regional differences (between those wineries south of the township, Willyabrup and the Cape) there has been no systematic documentation of these differences. It is hoped that the tasting attended by Margaret River winemakers and key wine writers from throughout Australia will throw some light on the topic. Given the quality of the 1999 vintage, reports on the tasting will make fascinating reading.

The Price of Moss Wood

Over the past twelve months, the price of Moss Wood Cabernet at auction has risen dramatically. In the latest catalogue of Langton's Fine Wine Auctions, the following estimates are given:

1983 (Special Reserve) \$80 – 120; 1987 Cabernet \$90 – 120; 1990 Cabernet \$90+;

1992 Cabernet (magnum) \$180+; 1993 Cabernet \$75 – 90; 1994 Cabernet \$85 – 95; 1995 Cabernet \$75 – 95.

While we believe that wine is for drinking, it is gratifying to note the value that the auction market is placing on the Moss Wood Cabernets.

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