

MOSS WOOD

Newsletter

Nº 44

April, 2001

The 2000 Moss Wood Chardonnay

In February 2000, Moss Wood vineyard manager, Matt Bowden, was a happy man. The growing season for the 2000 vintage had been a beauty – not even the birds were a problem. His only concern was what sort of havoc the winemaking team would wreak on his marvellous handiwork! He has the same worries year in and year out: vintage conditions may vary but the one thing that remains constant, in Matt's eyes, is that he and his team do their best work out in the vineyard and then having to rely on the skills of others to ensure that their reputation stays intact. Luckily for Matthew, he's a big bloke with broad shoulders!

All jokes aside the season had been very good. There were some hot days during December but January and February were mild. A small amount of rain in late January came soon enough to refresh the vines but on the other hand, not late enough to cause any damage to the fruit. The chardonnay crop was in very good order indeed.



Picking started on 1st March and ran for three days. All came in according to plan although, at 14° Baume, the two main blocks were riper than the expected 13.5°. Technically speaking, it should have started two or three days earlier but then nobody is perfect!

As usual, the processing was divided into two parts. The 'clonal chardonnay' was picked separately and whole bunch pressed: the juice was then put straight into barrel for fermentation, allowing for inoculation by wild yeast culture. This slightly aggressive technique is used because these clones, selected from the University of California at Davis, are very high yielding and tend to lack good fruit flavour. In fact, around Margaret River they are disparagingly referred to as the 'Trebiano clones' because of their uncanny resemblance to this high yielding, neutral grape variety. To gain more complexity, the Moss Wood crew retain more solids than usual in the juice and carry out the entire fermentation in wood.

The 2000 Moss Wood Chardonnay [cont.]

The main batch, made using the Mendoza clone, is much more flavoursome and is treated more carefully to retain and enhance its good fruit depth. In this instance, the bunches were de-stemmed, the grapes pumped through the must chiller (which is cooled to 8°C) and then added to the press. Two lots of juice result: the free-run (the juice which drains off before pressing takes place) and the pressings (that which is extracted by the pressing process). These are combined, settled for 48 hours at 12°C and then pumped to a fermentation tank.

At this point, the juice is allowed to warm up and fermentation commences. For the 2000 Chardonnay, wild yeasts were allowed to start the process, and a pure yeast strain was added during fermentation to finish it off. Debate continues about the benefits this sequential inoculation technique brings. While there is no doubt in Keith's mind that the indigenous yeasts do add complexity to the wine, the risk associated with using a culture whose characteristics are not known in advance, is a worry for him. He believes that the loss of control over the process that this brings adds a commercial risk that is hard to justify, given the relatively small quality gains.

Once fermentation was underway, batonnage (lees stirring) was done once per day, both in tank and barrel. In the stainless steel tank the wine was held at 18°C and, when moved to casks where it was kept at ambient temperature. From the 2001 vintage, there will be even greater control because all the barrel cellars are now air-conditioned. After the primary ferment finished, the lees stirring continued once a week until the malolactic fermentation was completed. Then the wine was left undisturbed on its lees in new 225 litre French oak barriques for a total of ten months. It was bottled at the beginning of February 2001.

The 2000 Moss Wood Chardonnay is a fresh, lively wine. On the nose it shows primary fruit aromas of peach, melon, pineapple, passionfruit and grapefruit. It also displays the traditional complexity of chardonnay, although the fruit richness has tended to push this into the background slightly more than usual. However, there is integrated, smoky oak as well as doughy yeast autolysis characters and hints of caramel overtones from the malolactic fermentation. One observation of the Moss wood team is that this is a wine which needs some breathing time. Soon after opening the nose can be dominated somewhat by the wild yeast fermentation characters, but these soften after about 15-30 minutes. These characters follow through on the palate. The fruit flavours give a sweet, mouth-filling texture, which is smooth, rich and long, all underpinned by crisp acidity and some oak and tannin notes on the finish.

With these flavours and structure together with delicacy and finesse, the wine has significant appeal for early drinking. It is quite luscious in fact. However, that same structure, powerful flavours and good natural acidity will also provide a basis for long-term ageing and the wine can be cellared with confidence for between 10 to 15 years.

In terms of wine style and quality, Keith believes that 2000 is very similar to 1980. If pressed, under the threat of torture, to choose between them he would probably go for the former because it had less bird damage and the timing of the rain was also better. Apart from that, they are nearly twins with wines from both years showing lively and generous fruit characters with the sort of balance that makes them really very enjoyable – 'yummy' in fact!

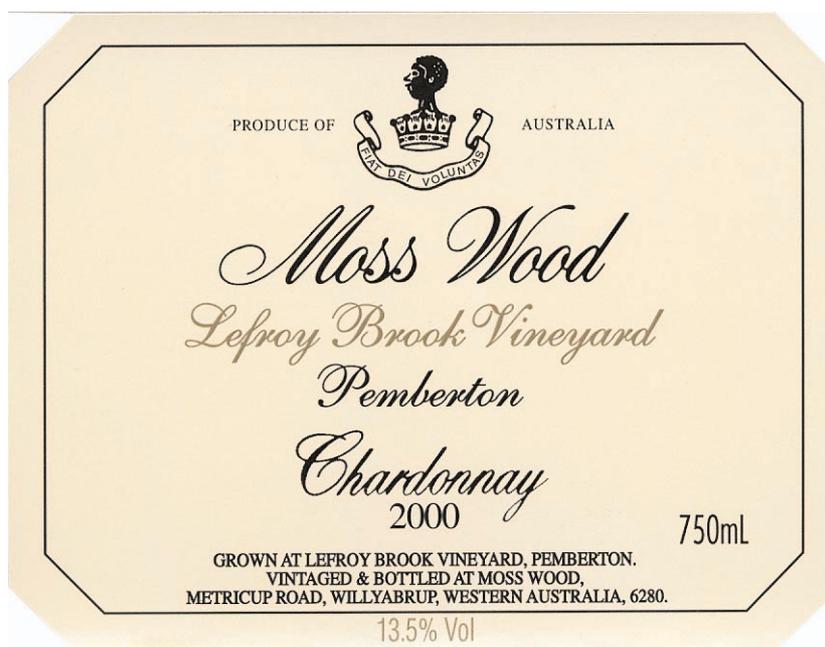
Welcome to Sarah Fowler

Fourth year Oenology student from Adelaide University, Sarah Fowler has joined the Moss Wood team to help with, and then report on, the 2001 vintage as part of her first semester studies. Sarah is a very capable person (for a South Australian, says Keith who used to be one), has fitted in well and seems to cope admirably with the difficulty of working with Ian Bell and Matt Bowden. That in itself is something of an achievement! Many would have enjoyed wines made by Sarah's father, Ralph Fowler at places such as Hungerford Hill, Tyrrell's and Leconfield. He is now establishing a family winery (Ralph Fowler Wines) at Mount Benson on the Limestone Coast.

The 2000 Moss Wood 'Lefroy Brook Vineyard' Chardonnay

Just as in Margaret River, the 1999–2000 growing season was a good one in Pemberton too. Pat and Barbara Holt had the Lefroy Brook vineyard in excellent condition, with the vines in good health and showing no hint of pest or disease. The only complication was the threat of some heavy rain from the remnants of a cyclone that had started its life in Queensland of all places. This loomed as a problem for vignerons throughout the southwest region of Western Australia but in particular at Pemberton because it looked very likely to dump a significant amount of rain on the day of the chardonnay harvest. Luckily, the heavy rain did not eventuate and so the fruit came off in excellent condition but it was certainly a close run thing. So, on the 12th March, the Lefroy Brook Chardonnay was picked at 13.5° Baume, which is as close to perfect as we could have hoped for.

The same Moss Wood technique of production is used with the Pemberton wine. The fruit was destemmed, chilled and pressed and then the juice settled for 48 hours. This was then racked into a stainless steel tank where wild yeast commenced the fermentation. Following the process of sequential inoculation, a pure yeast strain was added during fermentation to finish the process. At 10° Baume the juice was racked into new 225 litre French oak barrels where it finished fermentation and then remained for the next ten months. Batonnage was carried out once per day during primary ferment and then once per week during the malolactic after which the wine was no longer stirred but left to sit on the lees.



The 2000 vintage is typical of our Pemberton Chardonnay style. The nose has a grapefruit and lime fresh citrus lift with some pear and peach aromas in the background and toasty oak. There is complexity from the caramel characters of malolactic fermentation and also the typical Pemberton Chardonnay fruit smell, which is reminiscent of toffee and honey.

The wine has a lively palate. Acid and tannin are more obvious than in the Margaret River wine but this firmness of structure provides an interesting divergence of style. The citrus fruit flavours are lifted and fresh, the mouth feel is good, with medium weight and good texture. The acidity is crisp and the oak on the finish gives complexity and adds to the overall length.

Moss Wood has been making Pemberton Chardonnay for 10 vintages and so it is becoming easier to make predictions about the wine's future. Keith is very happy to recommend this wine for cellaring, believing that it will need a minimum of 5 years but he would prefer that it be kept for at least 10 years by those who wish to see it at its best.

Cellaring Moss Wood Chardonnay

An enquiry about the quality of the 1996 vintage, received from a long-standing customer, has led the Moss Wood team to review the cellaring of our chardonnay. In essence, the customer had been disappointed by two bottles from his well-cellared case and wanted advice on how we felt the wine looked at present and also whether it would continue to improve in the cellar. We therefore conducted a series of tastings comparing different vintages of Moss Wood, as well as other chardonnays from Margaret River producers, from interstate and from overseas. The results were very interesting.

During our time at Moss Wood, we have learnt that both cabernet sauvignon and semillon will go through a stage, which we loosely describe as adolescence. It occurs when the wines are between three and ten years of age and marks the transition between young and mature wine. Why it happens is not completely clear but adolescence occurs when the wine is old enough to have lost its primary fruit aromas and flavours but is not yet old enough to have developed its mature, bottle age characters.

Adolescence is not something that has worried us with either chardonnay or pinot noir. Indeed, the latter hardly displays this at all. However, we now believe that it is an issue for chardonnay. Using our recent tastings as a guide, the 1997, 1996, 1995, 1994, 1993 and 1992 vintages may have some bottles which display adolescence, if only to a minor degree. The 1990 and 1991 vintages are just about through the cycle, although there is a chance that the 1990, a very slowly developing vintage, may still have an odd adolescent bottle. From 1989 onwards, the wines seem to be going through the stage. These earlier vintages have provided us with some very pleasurable drinking (one of the tough parts of being a winemaker) and we would like to reiterate that the chardonnay will repay long-term cellaring, in full.

There is one final note of caution. Over the last five years, the Australian Wine Research Institute has been required to investigate a phenomenon called 'random bottle oxidation'. It is largely a problem with white wines and has occurred in wines from all regions of Australia. Random bottle oxidation manifests itself in the form of very rapid ageing of some bottles of a particular wine but it is not consistent across the whole batch. The percentage of the bottles affected will vary from wine to wine but again, there is no consistency. At present, the Institute is continuing its work on the problem and we look forward to hearing the results of its research.

This is all relevant to the discussion here. Keith is now of the view that Moss Wood 1996 Chardonnay may have the problem, at least to a small extent. It has only come to light as a result of our recent tastings and the extent of the problem is unclear. So far, there has only been one customer who has raised concerns but if anyone else has had a problem, the Moss Wood team would be very keen to hear about it.

An early perspective on the 2001 Vintage at Moss Wood

Keith reports that the first vintage of the new millennium looked promising at the beginning of March. An early flowering translated into an early start with picking between ten and fourteen days ahead of the norm. A mild summer encouraged good vine growth with the only problem being worse than usual bird damage early on. As spraying hadn't been finished when the earliest bird attacks ever hit Moss Wood, the vineyard team were unable to protect the vines with nets. Consequently, the two week period during which the vines were unnetted resulted in a loss of between one and five per cent of the chardonnay and pinot noir. Keith was amazed at that the birds were so hungry that they would attack green grapes.

The perfect flowering conditions has meant that yields will be higher than expected and will go close to matching the abundant 2000 harvest. Fortunately, the pinot noir crop was bunch thinned and so its yield will be average. The other varieties should be about 10% above average. At the beginning of March, the vines were looking a bit dry but were coping quite well. Keith gritted his teeth and insisted that he didn't want to see any rain before the end of harvest: 'We will live with the drought.'

Moss Wood Chardonnay Vintage Chart

Vintage	Harvest Date	° Baume	Yield (tonnes/ha)	Vintage Rating (out of 10)
1983	18 February	12.6	8.7	7
1984	29 February	13.1	7.73	8
1985	22 February	12.5	8.44	7
1986	26 February	12.9	9.1	7
1987	24 February	12.9	10.13	8
1988	12 February	12.5	11.2	7
1989	20 February	12.9	7.82	7 +
1990	6 March	12.9	6.85	10
1991	25 March	12.8	6.36	8
1992	27 February	13.5	7.3	8 +
1993	4 March	13.6	10.29	10
1994	28 February	13.6	9.0	9
1995	17 February	13.7	7.0	10
1996	20 February	13.2	9.0	9 +
1997	7 March	13.6	2.58	9
1998	5 March	14.1	4.08	9
1999	3 March	13.4	6.89	9 +
2000	1 March	13.4	5.2	9

Keith is planning a complete vertical tasting so that this chart can be revised for next year's Chardonnay Newsletter.

Among Australia's Best

During 2000, The Wine Magazine reviewed its list of Australian Top 20 Chardonnays. The magazine had conducted its first review in 1997 and published a list of what its panel considered to be the country's 20 top chardonnays. In order to see how its choices were faring, the panel tasted two vintages of the original Top 20 plus wines from about fifteen challengers. Moss Wood submitted their 1990 and 1999 vintages and both were very well received. The team at the winery were delighted to see Moss Wood retain its Top 20 status.

Here are Huon Hooke's typically frank comments on the tasting.

Moss Wood

This was another chardonnay from 1999, which would be better released a year older. It is light yellow, rather dumb to sniff and never really opened up in the glass. The palate was tight and reserved, with a slight phenolic grip, and the oak was sitting slightly apart from the fruit at this stage. It requires an act of faith to cellar it.

On the other hand the 1990, while a lovely drink, was probably a fraction past its best. I think these wines drink best around four to five years. Still, the 1990 is a beautifully mellow, aged chardonnay and the comment was made that whereas many Oz chardonnays were over-oaked in that era, this wasn't. Multi-layered toast, caramel and vanilla aged characters were interwoven with vestiges of peach and honey, and an unusual overlay of kerosene, rather like an old riesling. With this and the 1996 Cullen two bottles were opened, in each case the bottle variation was marked, emphasising the point that corks are not perfect and it's safer to drink chardonnay younger rather than older.

Downey mildew, quarantine and taking care

Not everything was perfect for the 2000 vintage. In some parts of the Margaret River region the rain had led to an outbreak of the fungal disease, downy mildew. Fortunately at Moss Wood and Ribbon Vale we have been able to keep the fungus out of our vineyards, at least for the moment. The disease has caused some headlines in Western Australia because until just recently this state has been free of it. A combination of an efficient plant quarantine system and the Nullarbor Plain had been very effective in keeping downy mildew away from our precious vineyards. However, as is so often the case, eventually these things seem to be able to creep in.

There are two very serious problems that are still not found in Western Australia and the local industry wants to keep it that way.

One is the vine louse, phylloxera, which kills the plant by destroying its roots. In the late nineteenth century, phylloxera progressively wiped out all the vineyards of France. The wine industry there only survived by replanting its vineyards on American rootstock. The cost including loss of income was enormous. In more recent times, phylloxera has devastated the vineyards of California.

The second problem is less well known - a bacterial infection called Pierce's disease - which is now a massive threat to the Californian wine industry.

Keith believes that we can all make a contribution towards the fight to keep Western Australia free of serious disease. Bringing plant material into this state without going through the proper channels may put the WA wine industry at risk. He asks all lovers of Moss Wood wines to take every opportunity to raise this issue with anyone who appears casual about following quarantine regulations on arrival in Western Australia from interstate or overseas.

Moss Wood and Ribbon Vale

The Moss Wood team would like its customers to know that they are making progress with the Ribbon Vale vineyard. The 2000 harvest, which was grown by the previous proprietor, John James, but made by Moss Wood, is showing early promise.

In the barrel, the two red wines – the Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc blend and the varietal Merlot – have prompted a pleasing response from those visitors who have tasted them.

Similarly, the just released Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc wines have been well received at the cellar door tasting room at Ribbon Vale.

In the meantime, our programme of improvement in the vineyard and winery at Ribbon Vale continues. The team is very pleased with the results and looks forward to the 2001 vintage with confidence.

Customers who are interested in knowing more about the particular wines mentioned above are encouraged to contact the Moss Wood office for further details. Similarly, those of you who are more generally interested in the developments at Ribbon Vale and who wish to receive information about the future wine releases under the wing of the *splendid wren* label please tick the box on the Moss Wood order form so we can start building our contact list.

Not a box of tricks!

Continuing down the ornithology track, we hope the more eagle-eyed of you have spotted the slight change of postal address for Moss Wood: PO Box 225, COWARAMUP WA 6284.

The new Post Office box is much closer to the winery and this makes life a lot easier for the busy office crew. (We have not yet started calculating the savings in petrol!) Although the postal address has changed, our email address, telephone and fax numbers remain the same.

MOSS WOOD

Order form

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April 2001

2000 Moss Wood Chardonnay

\$45 per bottle – \$540 per dozen

2000 Moss Wood 'Lefroy Brook Vineyard' Chardonnay

\$33 per bottle – \$396 per dozen

Mixed orders as requested to add up to six or twelve bottle cases only.

ALL PRICES ARE INCLUSIVE OF GST

Please supply	Bottle Qty		\$
2000 Moss Wood Chardonnay		@ \$45 per bottle/\$540 per dozen	
2000 Moss Wood 'Lefroy Brook' Chardonnay		@ \$33 per bottle/\$396 per dozen	
Please add freight as outlined overleaf:			
1st case		@ \$	rate per case
Additional case/s		@ \$	rate per case
Insurance per consignment		@ \$ 2.50	2.50

If making payment by cheque/money order (payable to Moss Wood Pty Ltd), prior to posting, please phone to confirm availability of wine.

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No

PLEASE ENSURE CORRECT UPPER AND LOWER CASE LETTERS ARE USED AS REQUIRED

Name:

e-mail address:

Please send Ribbon Vale information by e-mail

Yes

No

or by post

Yes

No

MOSS WOOD

Order form

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April 2001

FREIGHT CHARGES

ALL PRICES ARE INCLUSIVE OF GST

Please allow three weeks for processing and a further two weeks
for the delivery of your order.

CAPITAL CITIES:

	Perth	Melbourne	Sydney	Adelaide	Canberra	Brisbane	Darwin
1st case	\$10.00	\$14.70	\$14.70	\$13.60	\$15.80	\$18.80	\$18.80
Additional case each	\$6.75	\$9.25	\$9.25	\$8.70	\$10.35	\$12.00	\$12.00

Hobart and Launceston	\$29.95	1st case
	\$21.30	each additional case

COUNTRY AREAS:

Margaret River, Busselton & Bunbury WA	\$4.90	each case
Other WA country areas	\$21.60 \$15.40	1st case each additional case
Victoria, South Australia and NSW country areas	\$23.40 \$19.60	1st case each additional case
ACT country areas	\$15.80 \$10.35	1st case each additional case
Northern Territory country areas	\$24.00 \$20.20	1st case each additional case
Queensland and Tasmania country areas	\$29.95 \$25.60	1st case each additional case

Insurance	\$2.50	per consignment
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