

The captivating Coonawarra

WHILE CABERNET SAUVIGNON HAS BECOME SYNONYMOUS WITH THE COONAWARRA, CHRISTINE SALINS SPEAKS WITH PRODUCERS WHO SAY THE REGION IS AUSTRALIA'S GREATEST FOR ALL RED WINE VARIETALS.

Cabernet Sauvignon might be a leader on the world stage but in Australia it has had to wait patiently in the wings.

“Unfortunately, Coonawarra along with Cabernet hasn’t been the flavour of the month for a while in the Australian market, but I think we’ve seen a lot of change to that in the last 12 months,” said Burke Reschke, MD of Reschke Wines.

Paul Heilman is even more positive about the consumer shift. “Having a range of Coonawarra Cabernet is compulsory at the moment,” said the MD of Top Cellars Group, which has six stores across NSW.

Heilman said shoppers are becoming very savvy about appellation-specific wines and Coonawarra is well poised to take advantage of that.

“Having the appellation clearly on a label is more important now than ever,” Heilman said. “Coonawarra is the standout for South Australian Cabernet. It’s what people know and love.”

The ‘slow and steady rules the day’ philosophy is evident in the 125 years of winemaking since John Riddoch founded the Coonawarra Fruit Colony in 1890. Riddoch, whose name lives on in Wynns’ flagship John Riddoch Cabernet Sauvignon, was a visionary. By 1898, Coonawarra wines were being exported to England and Europe. The region subsequently underwent a long downturn before Samuel Wynn recognised the potential of its remarkable strip of terra rossa soil and bought the Riddoch cellars in 1951.

THE COONAWARRA ROADSHOW

Coonawarra continues to live Riddoch’s dream of growing quality grapes and producing wines of distinction. That’s the message that Coonawarra folk will be taking on the road for their 12th annual roadshow. Twenty-six companies will participate, offering tastings of their wine in six Australian cities throughout August.

The roadshow caps off a busy first half of the year for the Coonawarra Vignerons Association; a delegation travelled to China as part of a Wine Australia promotion, there were events such as After Dark weekend in April, as well as various pop-up cellar door events.

The region is also about to host the second triennial Australian Cabernet Symposium in October, bringing together international and Australian experts who

will look at innovations and developments in wine research, viticulture, winemaking and marketing of Cabernet Sauvignon.

The roadshow is an important marketing tool for Leconfield Wines, which has had an excellent year with growth in most markets. Earlier this year, Leconfield 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon won the trophy for the best Australian Bordeaux varietal at the Decanter World Wine Awards. It plans to release its first Reserve Cabernet, from the 2012 vintage, next year.

Senior winemaker Paul Gordon suggested keeping some space in the cellar for wine from the 2015 vintage.

“The 2014-15 growing season had significantly lower rainfall during spring than average. Coupled with warmer temperatures, this led to an early and even flowering with good fruit set, but with generally lower bunch numbers, resulting in lower than average yields,” he said.

“Some welcome rain in mid-January reduced some of the stress in the vineyards. Warmer early February temperatures brought on the ripening of whites and our Riesling and Chardonnay were both picked before March – a couple of weeks earlier than we would normally expect. Both wines look exceptionally good with fine varietal flavour and natural acidity.

“March and April saw cooler than average conditions, especially at night and was perfect for ripening reds. Harvest began in the third week of March and concluded in mid-April. All reds, but especially Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, are very robust wines with great colour intensity and similar in weight to the acclaimed 2010 vintage.”

Nick Zema, of Zema Estate, agreed that it had been a relatively stress-free vintage, thanks to the long, cool ripening period. “Overall, general quality is looking promising with both Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon showing strong fruit definition and big tannin structure.” Zema is happy with sales over the last 12 months in what is still a tight market. “NSW and Victoria are growing strong sales while the rest of the states continue to hold.”

Zema said that although Coonawarra is renowned for Cabernet, it is a strong region for all red wines. The full range, due for release in October, includes 2012 Cluny, 2012 Shiraz, 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon, 2010 Family Selection Shiraz and 2010 Family Selection Cabernet Sauvignon.

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– Paul Heilman, Top Cellars.

COONAWARRA



Louise Agnew Photography.

“Shiraz is very important for our brand and is performing extremely well. Coonawarra Shiraz is proving to be a great choice for consumers who are looking for a full-bodied yet elegant style [compared with] other regions around Australia.”

Zema Estate strives to release its wines with a reasonable amount of bottle age so the wines drink well on release yet still have the depth and structure to cellar. “This is proving to be a good point of difference for us, especially on-premise,” Zema said.

Burke Reschke wishes more Coonawarra wineries would age their wines. If opened too young, Cabernet has a tendency to be green and flat, with a “stewed fruit flavour that isn’t endearing”.

“You need to get some elegance and balance. I certainly don’t want a big, intense wine when I’m having it with a meal. I hardly drink anything under 10 years when I’m drinking at home. Most of our Cabernets I try to hold onto for a few years,” Reschke said.

“I’d love to see a few more doing what we’re doing. I like the point of difference in being a winery that releases wine with a bit of age and under cork.”

Reschke’s top two current release Cabernets, **Empyrean** and **Bos**, are from 2006. “It’s a huge investment [to cellar them for so long before release]. They’ll both come quite quickly through the next bit – 2007 wasn’t a great vintage so we’ll go straight to the 2008 – and that’s where I’d like it to be sitting [for current releases].”

According to Reschke, the recent shift in thinking about Coonawarra has been led by the international market. “One [factor] is the dollar coming down, but also, we’ve been so quiet in the overseas market, people are coming looking for us. Cabernet is appreciated much more in the overseas markets than it is in Australia.”

Reschke wines are in a few small overseas markets but would still like to get into the UK and US. Overseas sales are improving. It sold about 10 per cent overseas during the whole of 2014. By July 2015, it had already sold 10 per cent overseas. “I’d like to see 50 per cent of our sales going overseas but it’s risky because it’s susceptible to exchange rate fluctuations.”

Reschke has just released its first **Merlot Rosé**. It is from the 2013 vintage and is “going unbelievably well. A lot of people are looking for Rosé and we’ve tried to fit into that market and make it a very serious one, with almost zero sugar”.

BUCKING THE TREND

Although not certified organic, Reschke has been green from the start, foregoing the use of harsh chemicals and relying on predatory mites for insect control.

Joe Cory, Hollick winemaker.



Neilson's Block.



“It’s probably easier for us because there are no other vineyards up to our boundaries. You’ll get a small outbreak of moth and all the viticulturists in the region will be spraying, but in our vineyard the predatory mites get on top of them.”

Bowen Estate imported a mechanical under-vine weeder from Italy last year to help with its vineyard management. “It negates the use of any weedicides in our vineyard management,” said winemaker Emma Bowen. “As far as we know, the mechanics of the weeder are the first of its kind in Australia.”

The family run business is unashamedly old school in its approach to making wine. They hand prune and use an arch cane trellis system to improve bunch exposure and ripeness, producing a tiny range of classic Coonawarra wines, still bottled under cork with a decidedly old fashioned label.

Its current releases are the **2014 Bowen Estate Chardonnay**, bright and rich with notes of melon, citrus and stone fruit; the **2013 Bowen Estate Cabernet Sauvignon**, bold and full-bodied with cedar and blackberry notes; and **2013 Bowen Estate Shiraz**, with seductive spices and a hint of earthiness.

Although Coonawarra’s reputation for Cabernet Sauvignon is unquestioned, a number of producers, including Bowen Estate, produce Shiraz that easily rivals Australia’s best.

Redman Wines bucks the Coonawarra trend by being Shiraz dominant. Of its 85 acres, 60 acres are planted to Shiraz, 23 acres to Cabernet

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COONAWARRA

Sauvignon and two to Merlot. Redman produces only red wine and is still in love with cork.

Daniel Redman is quietly optimistic about their 2015 wines, which he said were showing really good structure and flavour.

"The crops were about 20 per cent below average, with the grapes being in excellent condition," he said. "The first thing we noticed about the 2015 vintage wines was the deep colour, and this was common to all our reds. There were also some fantastic aromas through the winery during fermentation and... very good varietal characteristics evident."

Sales over the past 12 months have been slightly down. Redman attributes this to various factors, including the competitive nature of the industry "and we have just sold the last of our 2011 wines, which has been a difficult vintage to sell".

But there are plenty of bright spots on the horizon. "The Redman Wines label will turn 50 next year so we will be making an extra effort in marketing and promotions in 2016." The company is also exploring export opportunities into the US and China.

PLAYING TO COONAWARRA'S STRENGTH

Redman has a new cellar door only wine, *The Last Row 2013 Shiraz*. "We had 1.5 tonnes of Shiraz left on the vineyard so we let a natural ferment take place then used an old basket press. We put the wine into some new and old French oak and produced only 1200 bottles." They have followed it up with 2014 and 2015 vintages.

John Rymill, managing director of **Rymill Coonawarra**, said that although the market is "ever more crowded and competitive", the Rymill brand has been performing quite solidly. "We are pleased to have seen some growth on-premise and with independent outlets too. The introduction of a SKU specifically for those customers has been really well supported, which is fantastic."

Rymill intends to refresh and invigorate its packaging over the next year, while continuing to focus on independent channels by removing drive SKUs from chain stores. It has a cellar door only, single vineyard Cabernet called *Sandstone* on the cards. "The flavour profile is quite unique as it comes from the southern end of Coonawarra," Rymill said.

"We enjoy working with small batches of different varieties, however no other region in the world is so focused on one variety, and that is because Coonawarra grows excellent Cabernet nine years in 10. We will continue to play to this strength [but] will look to see if there are different ways of presenting Coonawarra Cabernet. The *Dark Horse* is an excellent example of Coonawarra Cabernet made to a different style, and it's been very well received."

Rymill's family history is inextricably linked with Coonawarra as he is the great-great grandson of John Riddoch. **Hollick Wines' Neilson's Block** was one of the original allocations in the Coonawarra Fruit Colony that Riddoch founded. Ian and Wendy Hollick bought the block in 1974 and planted it to Cabernet Sauvignon, Riesling, Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc.

Earlier this year, Hollick appointed **Vintage House Wine and Spirits**, the newly formed distribution company of the **Angove** family, as its Australian distributor, filling a gap in the Vintage House portfolio for a premium Coonawarra range.

Hollick Wines launched onto the national and international wine scene when its 1984 Cabernet Sauvignon won the **Jimmy Watson Trophy** at the **Royal Melbourne Wine Show** in 1985. The resulting demand led to further plantings and diversification into Shiraz, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Petit Verdot, and more recently Tempranillo, Sangiovese, Barbera and Savagnin. Managing director Ian Hollick said joining Vintage House Wine and Spirits would allow them to take Hollick to a new level.

It was winning the Jimmy Watson trophy at the Melbourne Wine Show in 1998 that heralded the arrival of **Prodigy**, the flagship Shiraz



Leconfield vineyard.



Jack Estate winemaker, Shannon Sutherland and assistant winemaker, Jared Stringer.



Wayne Stehbens, senior winemaker, Katnook Estate.



Leconfield vineyards.

COONAWARRA

produced by **Katnook Estate**. Senior winemaker Wayne Stehbens first made Prodigy in 1997 and it continues to be small batch vinified in open fermenters, basket pressed and then matured in new French and American oak barriques for 24 to 28 months.

NEW RELEASES

Katnook has just released **Prodigy 2010 Shiraz** and its other flagship, **Odyssey 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon**. Stehbens said the 2010 vintage was one of the finest on record for the region: "It was an early, warm, dry, low yielding vintage which led to intense fruit aromas, great depth of flavours and fine tannins."

The proof is in the bottle, with Prodigy showing intense raspberry and plum notes, warming spice and a deliciously long finish. Odyssey, meanwhile, is dense with chocolate notes and rich, ripe fruit.

Brand's Laira is excited about the pending release of its **1968 Vines 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon**. "We are really fond of the classic design of the labels on the **1968 Vines & Tall Vines**," said brand manager, Amy Hodgson.

Brand's Laira is also proud of its new range of **Old Station** wines, including a **2012 Cabernet Shiraz** and **2014 Riesling**, bringing alive the classic Australian blend of Cabernet and Shiraz and reintroducing the definitive style of Riesling to the Brand's Laira portfolio. The Riesling is made in an off-dry style.

Petaluma released a new range, **Petaluma White Label**, a few years ago, mainly from its Adelaide Hills vineyards but with a Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon. The 2013 current release is a soft tannin, full-bodied dry red with unmistakable Coonawarra Cabernet leaf and mint, made to drink now.

Petaluma has what senior winemaker and brand ambassador Andrew Hardy describes as

"a small play" with Malbec. The first **Petaluma Project Company Malbec**, from the 2010 vintage, was released in 2012 and followed by 2012 and 2013 vintages. "[Malbec] produces wonderfully spicy, structured perfumed, black tannic wines in Coonawarra, and also makes a great blending component," Hardy said.

"We've been making a straight Merlot from Coonawarra since 1990, first released in 1991 on indent, and delivered to customers in 1992. Big rich and tannic, they are wines that age incredibly gracefully. The 2012 vintage is about to be released, earlier than normal, as we made no 2009 or 2011."

Hardy said the 2015 reds in barrel were "elegant and tasting gloriously... a true Coonawarra year needing extended time in oak".

Top Cellars' Paul Heilman said buying according to appellation has become increasingly important to consumers in the last few years. "Wine lovers have always known it but because we're becoming a nation of foodies, it's extending to the ordinary consumer as well.

"What's under-executed in the retail market is helping shoppers find appellation-specific wines, and it's not just category management [that retailers need to pay attention to] but specific sections within a category. We have a specific area within Cabernet where Coonawarra can sit."

Heilman said it is important for regions like Coonawarra to market themselves as a region. "If a particular vineyard is doing well, every winery in the region gets a lift in sales. It's a bit of a change in mindset for retailers to be able to service that need."

His message to Coonawarra winemakers? "I would implore them to keep doing what they're doing very, very well." **NLN**



Demet Zema, Zema Estate.



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