

How the west was won

AWARD-WINNING WINES ARE COMING OUT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA FOR A MYRIAD OF REASONS. CHRISTINE SALINS REPORTS.

Australian winemakers need to respond to the growing dominance of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, according to Ferngrove's sales and marketing manager, Andrew Blythe, and he believes Western Australia's Frankland River is just the region to do it.

"Now is the time to steer people away from drinking New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc towards new, slender styles of Australian Chardonnay that carry more elegance and purity," Blythe said. "Cool climate is the key to new wave Chardonnay, and Frankland River is well placed in what wine critic James Halliday terms the 'dress circle' of cool climate regions."

Blythe believes the "distinctive lightness of touch" combined with ripeness of fruit that Frankland River produces is unusual among Australian wine regions. It seems that consumers, not just in Australia but overseas as well, are beginning to appreciate this too.

"The past 12 months have been encouraging for Ferngrove, starting with great success in key export markets where there is a real

growing interest for cooler-climate styles from Australia," Blythe said.

"Ferngrove has been actively seeking out this growing interest in markets like Scandinavia and the USA. Our recent success in Scandinavia is a result of this. Out of a possible five Western Australian tenders in Sweden, Norway and Finland over the past 18 months, Ferngrove has achieved a great result in winning three."

Over the coming months, Ferngrove will work closely with newly formed national distributor Vintage House Wines and Spirits to increase the focus on its wines in the domestic market, especially with on-premise and independent retail customers. Blythe said the company would continue to drive the Chardonnay and Malbec message. Ferngrove has gained a strong following with Malbec.

"Last year we trialed a Malbec Rosé and Sparkling Malbec and both sold out within six months of launch," he said. "Frankland River is home to great Malbec which we've had planted now for 17 years. It's a variety that has natural high acidity but lovely texture and

fabulous tannins. We see Malbec, with its level of acidity, as a great food match and a great advantage on any wine list or retail shop."

Although 2015 is proving to be a testing vintage, 2014 was an exceptional year for Frankland River, according to Blythe.

"During the ripening period, the nights were cool with mild days which allowed the white grapes to hold their natural acidity but also flavours developed earlier. Chardonnay has a superb line of natural acidity balanced with flavour.

"The milder conditions during the day and cooler night time temperatures were perfect for reds, enabling full development, especially in Cabernet Sauvignon, concentrating its flavour and softening tannin levels naturally. Shiraz also shows great intensity with excellent colour and great tannin structure."

Blythe's key message to retailers is to look at who they are doing business with. Many labels, he said, were virtual brands, that is, made by "someone in an office in the city or someone at a swanky coffee shop".



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"Everything you see about Ferngrove is real. We are tangible and have real vines and real people with a great story to tell. We tell our story through the wine we make. We are honest, hardworking, down to earth people supporting local communities and families in the Great Southern region of Western Australia."

Houghton, too, is squarely focused on its Western Australian origins. Australia's third largest winery, Houghton can look back with pride but it also looks to the future with optimism. Last year, it released a new range, Crofters, in four classic styles from Frankland River, Pemberton and Margaret River.

The range retails for under \$20 and is available nationally. Three of the four wines are from the 2013 vintage, a strong one in the Great Southern region. Ross Pamment, Houghton senior winemaker, said of it: "Moderate winter rainfall and a warm summer meant that flavour accumulated steadily, enabling fruit to be harvested upon reaching peak condition."

At the time of writing, Pamment was expecting a good finish to the 2015 season. "Conditions across the 2015 vintage have been hot and dry, similar to the past five years."

Pamment said Houghton was known for producing top quality, finely crafted wines, and the new Crofters range was no exception. The regionally expressive wines include a 2012 Frankland River Cabernet Sauvignon, 2013 Pemberton & Margaret River Sauvignon Blanc Semillon, 2013 Pemberton & Margaret River Chardonnay, and 2013 Frankland River Shiraz.

Senior brand manager, Bree Wood, said Houghton had performed strongly over the past 12 months, driven by its iconic White Classic that was now entering its 78th consecutive vintage, a remarkable run if ever there was. Hinting that some new projects might be launched later in the year, Wood said parent company Accolade would continue to invest in its WA brands, with a key focus on Houghton. Accolade's other WA brands include Brookland Valley, Amberley, Moondah Brook and Goundrey.

"The quality and breadth of wines available from us across all the key price points is unparalleled out of WA, and we want to get this message across to consumers and customers that we truly represent the very best of Western Australia," Wood said.

Frankland Estate exports about half its output and spokesman Hunter Smith believes the percentage is likely to increase this year as prices in export markets had strengthened. "In Australia we work with some of the best distributors in the country and they have worked hard with us to help build our customer base and build our brand awareness. So overall we are very positive," he said.

Frankland Estate's major event this year was its involvement in Riesling Down Under, an international Riesling tasting held in Melbourne in February. "This is a significant event for us and it will be held biannually here in Australia as we work with partners globally to host a similar event in USA and Germany."

Smith said special events were planned throughout Australia for the release of Frankland Estate's 2013 reds, especially Olmo's Reward. This year marks the 21st release of this flagship wine.

In January, Galafrey Wines won the Royalty of Riesling title for its 2014 Dry Land Riesling. Sponsored by the Mt Barker Wine Producers Association, the award aims to promote and celebrate WA's Great Southern as a premium Riesling region. West Cape Howe Wines took out the 2013 title.

Although the Galafrey brand had been around for 38 years and had a loyal following, retail had been tough, according to chief executive Kim Tyrer. The win had boosted sales.

"Now we are finding an increased interest in our brands as people move away from trendy comic book labels and are looking for wines with interesting stories and traditional quality product," Tyrer said. "With social media, we have the ability to really promote our product and stories and this has increased the interest in our wines."

CELLARING POTENTIAL

2014 PLANTAGENET RIESLING

"An intensely aromatic wine with a medley of citrus on the palate and striking mineral acidity. A vibrant fresh wine with clean lines and great length that will age for 10-20 years, developing wonderful toasty, honeyed characters."

Chris Murtha,
winemaker, *Plantagenet*

2011 HOUGHTON JACK MANN CABERNET SAUVIGNON

"A superbly structured wine, deep and complex with flavour that builds and seems to last forever on the aftertaste. The tannins are in balance with the fruit and oak flavours, providing the backbone to ensure a long cellar life. Leave it for as long as you can."

Ross Pamment,
winemaker, *Houghton*

2011 DEVIL'S LAIR 9TH CHAMBER CABERNET SAUVIGNON

"The fruit for this wine is sourced from a small parcel of Wilyabrup Cabernet Sauvignon of exceptional fruit intensity, tannin structure and regional expression. It's everything we aspire to in a Cabernet – beautiful cassis, fragrant, lovely tannins. It was made to live a long time."

Ben Miller, winemaker,
Devil's Lair

Ferngrove's winery and cellar door.

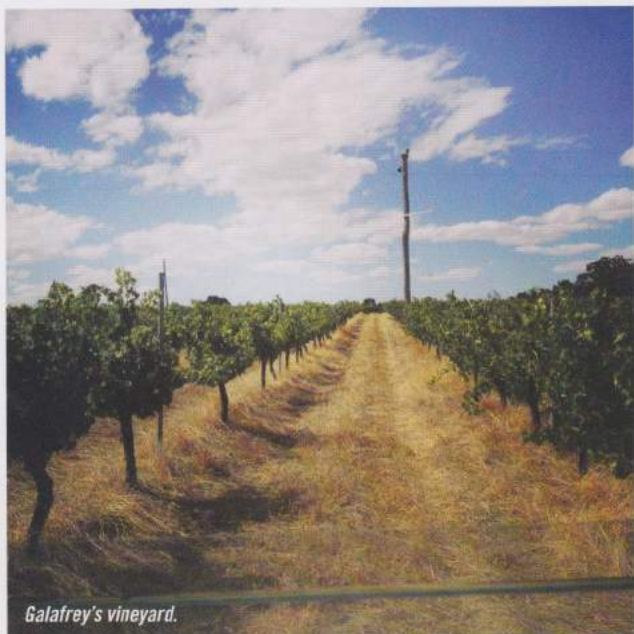
ISOLATION HAS ITS VIRTUES
WHEN MAKING GREAT WINES.



Howard Park's cellar door.



Devil's Lair.



Galafrey's vineyard.



“With social media, we have the ability to really promote our product and stories and this has increased the interest in our wines.”
 – Kim Tyrer, Galafrey Wines

Most of Galafrey's promotion is online, through video tasting notes and a popular blog. Galafrey will release a new Reserve Chardonnay mid-year. Made from dry grown grapes, Tyrer describes it as having “lifted fruit and malolactic fermentation flavours followed by a really nice new oak fresh finish”.

This year Galafrey is hoping to develop a new label for its Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Merlot, separating them from the Estate Dry Grown range and allowing more opportunities to do café style wine of the month deals. “With this development, we hope to really take our Dry Grown range to the next level with more distinction,” she said.

Tyrer encouraged retailers to support independent brands and family winemakers. “People are looking for something different from the norm. Wine is following the trend like ‘food grown locally, better flavour’ and (people) are happy to pay a little more which is good for both the retailer and small wineries.”

Expression of regionality is most definitely the mantra for Devil's Lair, whose vineyards are among the most southerly in Margaret River. Although its Chardonnay has been highly regarded for many years, its Cabernet is really coming of age with harmonious silky-fine tannins and great depth of flavour.

It has just released its inaugural 9th Chamber Cabernet Sauvignon, from the 2011 vintage and retailing for around \$120. 9th Chamber will only be made in exceptional vintages, with the next one, from the 2013 vintage, due to be released in 2016. Winemaker Ben Miller says the

company is increasingly sourcing its Cabernet from Wilyabrup in the northern part of Margaret River, where the warmer influence from the Indian Ocean consistently produces elegant and beautifully ripe fruit. 9th Chamber, he says, is “everything we aspire to in a Cabernet ... fragrant, with beautiful cassis and lovely tannins”.

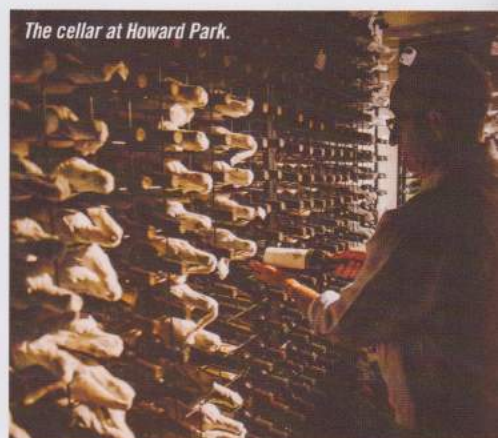
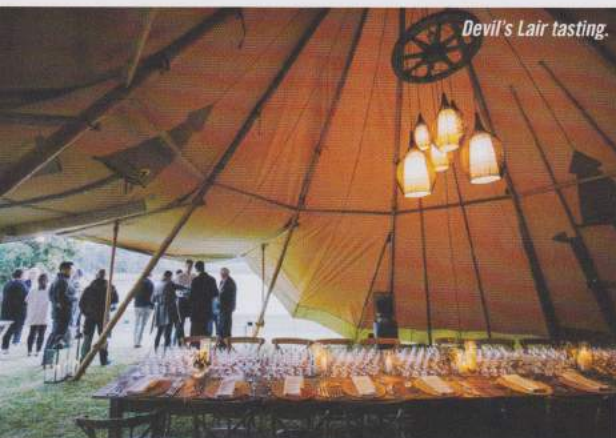
Miller said Devil's Lair Cabernet philosophy had always been to “look for subtlety and perfume with a good core of fruit. We're not looking for wines that are too over the top, and not too elegant either.” The company's entry level Cabernets, The Hidden Cave and Dance with the Devil, showed beautifully in a recent tasting alongside the Devil's Lair and 9th Chamber Cabernets.

Chardonnays from the 2013 vintage were also strong, with great vibrancy and persistence of fruit. Retailing for around \$50, the 2013 Devil's Lair Chardonnay is particularly smart. The 2013 9th Chamber Chardonnay will be matured for two more years before release.

Howard Park will celebrate its 30th anniversary next year, and to mark the occasion, will release the 2013 vintage of its flagship wine, Abercrombie Cabernet Sauvignon, with a version of the original label. The 2012 vintage was recently released.

Howard Park comes under the umbrella of Burch Family Wines, which also has the MadFish, and Marchand & Burch labels. Burch sources fruit from both the Margaret River and Great Southern regions.

It recently opened the Wine Chapel at the Howard Park winery in Margaret River, a high-end tasting room aimed at both domestic and international visitors, but



“Riesling is intense and pure, while Shiraz shows some lovely pepper and spice, indicative of a classic cool climate vintage.”
– Chris Murtha, Plantagenet

particularly the Chinese market. General manager Amy Burch said visitors could join one of three weekly tours or book the space for a customised experience with barrel or museum stock tastings.

Brand manager Christie Haertel said the Howard Park Regional Range had had great support over the past year, while Burch’s sparkling wines, Howard Park’s Jeté range and MadFish Vera’s Cuvee Sparkling, had also received quite a bit of attention.

Haertel said the MadFish brand was known and trusted for its reliability, while Howard Park represented “quality at every price point (and) a regional story”.

Marchand & Burch was a sophisticated offering with a partnership in Burgundy. Each year, a detailed marketing plan was developed around these themes, with tastings, in-store competitions and merchandise giveaways planned for this year.

Plantagenet winemaker Chris Murtha said 2015 would go down as one of the earliest seasons on record, with Chardonnay coming into the winery from early February. “Cool weather during flowering has resulted in lower yields, but fruit showing great concentration of flavour.” At the time of writing, whites were “looking great with big flavour and intensity”, Shiraz was “looking great with lots of dark fruit characters” and Cabernet Sauvignon was yet to be harvested.

In 2014, on the other hand, yields in the Great Southern region were marginally higher than average.

“Overall the Great Southern saw an excellent 2014 growing season and harvest,” Murtha said. “Quality was very high across the board with Riesling being a

particular standout. Slow ripening conditions combined with cool crisp nights have produced very aromatic and structured wines retaining good natural acid. Riesling is intense and pure, while Shiraz shows some lovely pepper and spice, indicative of a classic cool climate vintage.”

Plantagenet’s 2013 Cabernet and Shiraz are both due for release in April/May and national sales and marketing manager, Andrew Charleson, said pre-release tastings had the company very excited. “This could be one of our best releases for several years,” he said.

With the consolidation of the retail market continuing to place pressure on producers and retailers, Charleson encouraged retailers “to stay passionately interested in the products they sell”.

“Wines without a place or a real story behind them are essentially just fermented grape juice,” he said. “Plantagenet and many other small producers from around the world are absolutely focused on making the very best wines we can from the fruit that we nurture all year until vintage.”

Charleson said WA’s Great Southern region was relatively unknown to some consumers, yet when people tried the wines, they were invariably impressed by their stylish elegance and structure.

“Our Plantagenet Estate range continues to grow, within the restraints of limited availability for some varieties. Our Omrah brand continues to grow, predominantly within the retail market, however white wines from Western Australia have definitely lost sales to New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. We continue to encourage consumers to drink Australian (and) Great Southern in particular, as we know they won’t be disappointed,” he said. **NLN**

