# THE ANDRÉ L SIMON LECTURE 2015

Presented by

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# "A golden age for Australian wine"

We are living in a golden age for Australian wine. Yes, we are still in oversupply, meaning there is plenty of inexpensive wine around. And yes, we are still trying to woo back the British and American drinkers who fell out of love with our wines in the early 2000s. But thanks to a combination of older vines, better technical skills, a greater awareness of climate and a deeper understanding of the global wine market, we have entered what my winemaker of last year, Stephen Pannell from the McLaren Vale, calls the third wave of winemaking. Wave one came in the first half of the 20th century, when pioneering Australian winemakers such as Maurice O'Shea and Max Schubert returned from stints in Europe armed with the skills to make high-quality wines. O'Shea went onto found the Mount Pleasant vineyard, Schubert to create Grange Hermitage and at a time when Australian's drank far more fortified wine that table wine.

The second wave came in the late 20th century, when local winemakers developed a reputation for technically correct wines which sometimes lacked individuality. As we settle into the 21st century our best winemakers are far more interested in terroir. These third wave producers know that a sense of place is as important as grape variety. They also understand that certain grape varieties are more suited to some climates than others, hence the explosion of single vineyard wines over the last 15years.

A French term derived from the word terre, meaning soil, the concept of terroir has, historically embodied much of the difference between the wine thinking and production in the Old World (mainly France and Italy) and the New World which includes Australia.

The French have always been extremely keen to extol the virtue of particular vineyard sites as being the product of a complex amalgam of, not just the soil and subsoil, but anything that might contribute to the "uniqueness" of that site, including the climate (rainfall, wind, day and night temperatures and hours of sun are all factors here), elevation, aspect and drainage, to name just a few. France's hierarchical appellation system revolves around this notion that certain "privileged" vineyards produce the best wines.

At the core of this very French philosophy is the notion that while you can grow and make chardonnay - the famous white grape of Burgundy - successfully all over the world, you can only make Meursault in one place, and that's Meursault. Indeed, it is considered Meursault first and foremost, and chardonnay second. (Line up a range of Meursault from a great producer such as Guy Roulot and you can clearly see the differences between the individual vineyards/terroirs in wines made using basically the same technique.)

Where does this leave Australia? Historically, Australia has placed more emphasis on winemaking and varieties than on the vineyard. Not restricted by laws and tradition, there are many examples of classic Australian blends of varieties such as cabernet and shiraz, and of regions such as the Hunter and Coonawarra. Max Lake, in his 1966 book Classic Wines of Australia talks of the Hardy winemaker Dick Heath travelling to several of the top vineyards in the country looking for wines which he could blend to produce a harmony and continuity of style.

This philosophy is still at the heart of Australia's largest producers, such as Accolade and Treasury who champion the concept of multi-regional blending to make consistently good-to-great wine. There is little doubt that many of the commercial wines consumers buy in droves - Penfold's Koonunga Hill is one example - owe their consistency and quality to this concept.

The production of flagship wines such as Grange Hermitage and, more recently, Penfold's Yattarna Chardonnay, presents yet another example of the local approach. Penfolds has always argued that Grange is a reflection of the best - mainly Barossa Shiraz - fruit at its disposal; not the product of some unique and individual vineyard

site. Wine writers and the market-place obviously have no problem with this, as Grange has no equal in Australia in terms of prestige and historical importance.

One could argue that Grange has a regional identity, even if this is not quite the product of terroir as the French would have it.

As Peter Gago, Grange's urbane winemaker puts it, "If a wine can be improved by blending it, then that's what we will do." Southcorp's attitude is that, unlike the French, it has the ability to make both a Penfold's Grange and single vineyard wines such as Magill Shiraz (made every year) or the 1996 Kalimna Block 42 Cabernet - part of a series of one-off wines, made when vintage conditions demand it.

While Coonawarra's strip of terra rossa has historically been posited as an obvious example of terroir in Australia, the synergy between region and variety is at an all-time high. Adelaide Hills chardonnay and sauvignon blanc; Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula pinot noir; Barossa shiraz and grenache; Margaret River and Coonawarra cabernet sauvignon; and Clare, Eden Valley and Mount Barker riesling to name a few, are all just some of the varieties in Australia that have demonstrated this affinity with their locations.

The closest thing Australia has to a wine that reflects a terroir that cannot be readily duplicated elsewhere in the world is Hunter Valley Semillon. It is the product of a wet, humid and warm climate, soils that restrict vine vigour and reduce yields; and a winemaking philosophy by which the best wines are picked early with low sugar levels and high acidity. Neutral when young, the best wines (such as McWilliams Mt. Pleasant Elizabeth and Tyrrell's Vat 1) will develop rich, mouth-filling, honeyed, nutty and toasty aromas and flavours over a 10 to 20-year period. I would also put the great fortified muscats and muscadelles (which the region calls topaque) of north east Victoria in a similar category in that they are unique in the world of wine. Both these regions however remain relatively conservative.

One historically conservative region that I had never been excited about until recently is McLaren Vale in South Australia and the shift away from the high octane, alcoholic wines that were far more the norm in McLaren Vale (and the Barossa) a decade ago to wines that are now better balanced and, as a result, far

more drinkable is symptomatic of what has been happening in Australian over the last 10 or so years.

So, what are the reasons for this change? One is that Robert Parker, whose scores influenced how was made in the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale and what consumers purchased, is now no longer a factor. Parker gave up writing about Australian wine in 2007 which coincided with Australian wine no longer being the flavour of the month in the UK and USA and the global economic downturn that spelled the death knell for the very expensive, blockbuster wines Parker admired and scored so highly.

These wines still exist of course and you can pay $185 for Mollydooker's The Velvet Glove Shiraz 2012, which comes in at 16% alcohol and was matured in 100% new American oak. As I wrote last year, I don't have to taste this wine to know I wouldn't like it. Significantly, too, these are the very sort of wines that have fallen out of favour with sommeliers looking for wines that will go well with food.

Wines like Bekkers McLaren Vale Syrah 2012 personify McLaren Vale's new found confidence and energy than. Made by the husband and wife team of viticulturist Toby Bekkers and his French winemaking wife, Emmanuelle Bekkers, this relative newcomer raised a few eyebrows with its $110 price tag. It shouldn't have.

At 14.5% alcohol and matured in a mixture of new and older French 500 litre puncheons, this superb wine doesn't forgo the ripe fruit and concentration that one associates with McLaren Vale but there is a complexity and balance you don't often see. And a Stephen Pannell 2013 Shiraz made from an upper Tintara vineyard planted in the late 1800s, picked at 13 degrees baume and matured in old 2800 litre vat is one of the most thrilling wines I have tasted this year.

What has also emerged over the last decade is the growing interest (spearheaded by Stephen Pannell) in varieties suited to McLaren Vale's warm Mediterranean climate. McLaren Vale has long been a source of outstanding old vine Grenache (which, should be remembered is the Spanish variety, Garnacha) and the potential for so called alternative grape varieties from southern Italy and Spain is only being realised.

A study conducted by researchers at the University of Adelaide and Université Paris Diderot comparing the Mediterranean climate wine regions McLaren Vale and

Roussillon in France concluded last year that McLaren Vale is leading the world in adapting to climate change. This included 'local initiatives such as the recycled water scheme for irrigation' and the planting of Spanish and Italian varietals such as Tempranillo, Touriga, Nero d'Avolo and Vermentino.
In the nearby Barossa Valley, it's a similar story as a new generation of producer, including Alex Head, Spinifex, Ruggabellus and Sami Odi are crafting wines that focus on both sub region and site. They are generally picking earlier to retain acidity creating wines that still reflect the richness that is inherent in Barossa Shiraz but with a degree of finesse and elegance we haven't often seen before.

Regions such as McLaren Vale, the Hunter Valley, the Barossa Valley and The Yarra Valley were all making wine in the nineteenth century, so it's remarkable to think that if it wasn't for two papers published in 1965 and 1966 by Dr John Gladstones – a lecturer in agronomy at the University of Western Australia – in the Journal of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science that Western Australia's Margaret River wine region would not be celebrating 50 years of grape growing next year.

The original Margaret River plantings at Vasse Felix (1967) Moss Wood (1969) Cape Mentelle (1970) and Cullen (1971) all included Cabernet but not Chardonnay which wasn't on Gladstone's radar. Given the first commercially released chardonnay in Australia was made by Tyrrells in the Hunter Valley in 1971, cuttings were hard to come by and the varietal was still a relatively unknown proposition in Australia, let alone Western Australia when Leeuwin Estate (1975) and Cullen (1976) planted Chardonnay.

Cliff Royle's Voyager Estate 2002 Chardonnay was one of the first Margaret River chardonnays that was picked earlier and avoided malolactic fermentation which had been the norm. The result was a wine that was far more restrained and that Royle says was influenced by conversations with east coast chardonnay gurus Dave Bicknell (from Oakridge) and Tom Carson (now at Yabby Lake) and by burgundies he had tasted from Roulot and Pierre Yves Colin Morey.

It is Vasse Felix though – whose reputation was built on Cabernet, that has made more strides with Chardonnay than any other producer over the last decade. Virginia Wilcock, who was Gourmet Traveller WINE*'s* 2012 Australian

Winemaker of the Year, joined Vasse Felix at the end of 2006. The key here apart from high solids and wild yeast fermentations is when to pick the fruit, which Wilcock describes as critical.

With its funky, struck match aromas to go with superb fruit concentration and a beautifully delineated and detailed palate, the 2013 Heytesbury is the epitome of modern Australian Chardonnay. Along with the best wines from the region, this clearly demonstrates what a number of wine writers both internationally and in Australia have been saying for some time, and that's Australia is producing the greatest chardonnay in the world outside Burgundy.

Indeed the continued rise and rise of Australian chardonnay is possibly the most exciting development in Australian wine over the last 10-15 years. It's hard to believe now that when I chose my first top 20 wines for my AFR Magazine column, I considered not including a chardonnay at all!

As I've already mentioned, today's new breed of mod-Oz chardonnay is a world away from the rich, oaky styles that predominated in the 1980s and 1990s. The James Halliday Chardonnay challenge which I chaired this year and which as has gone from 260 wineries (from 40 regions) in 2012 to 355 producers (from 50 regions) is emblematic of the improvement and interest in the variety. It is well on the way to becoming the most significant wine show devoted to a single varietal in the world.

With some 60% of the 95 point (or above) wines between them, the two titans of Aussie chardonnay are the Yarra Valley and Margaret River even though this year's top gong went to the beautifully put together single vineyard Silkman Reserve Chardonnay 2014 from the Hunter Valley.

As I have written on more than one occasion just this month, the Yarra Valley, about 50 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, is, in my opinion. Australia's premier wine region of the moment. And although a Yarra Valley chardonnay is yet to win the challenge surely it's just a matter of time. At the Yarra Valley Wine Show, an impressive 14 out of about 90 chardonnay entries scored 95 points or above, earning them each a gold medal and making chardonnay not only a thrilling class to judge but the class that dominated the trophies. There wasn't much between the top four wines: Yering Station Reserve Chardonnay 2013, which won the trifecta of best chardonnay, best white wine and best wine trophies; Coldstream Hills Reserve Chardonnay 2013; Seville Estate Reserve Chardonnay 2014; and Oakridge 864

Funder & Diamond Drive Block Chardonnay 2013, which won the best single vineyard white wine trophy. What all these wines have in common is superb purity as well as perfectly integrated acidity, giving an assurance that, as good as they are now, they will age brilliantly. This was evidenced by the Seville Estate Reserve Chardonnay 2010, which won best museum wine at the show and is still very vibrant and fresh.

Screwcaps – a French invention pioneered (unsuccessfully it should be added) by Australia in the 1970s took off after Clare Riesling producers bottled their 1999s under stelvin. Screwcaps are playing an important part in giving these wines longevity. The idea that Australian chardonnay can improve over five years and indeed longer is relatively new and something to be celebrated.

Yarra cabernet remains underrated despite the cabernet blends of Mount Mary, Yeringberg and Yarra Yering having made the region's reputation in the 1970s and 1980s. It's not as consistent as Coonawarra or Margaret River but with the picking dates now about four weeks earlier than they were 20 years ago, the Yarra's cabernet should become more reliable. Taste either the 2005 or 2012 Yeringberg cabernet blend or Dominique Portet's 2013 which was the highest scoring cabernet at this year's show and you will see what I mean. They have an elegance and perfume not always found in the best examples from Coonawarra and Margaret River.

Shiraz is the new kid on the Yarra Valley block and while it's unlikely to ever seriously rival the Grampians or Barossa Valley in terms of output, the best wines from producers such as Timo Mayer, Jamsheed and, in particular, Giant Steps, have surprising depth of fruit to go with the spice, all in a medium to full-bodied framework.

The Yarra is also leading the way in the production of single vineyard wines and there are now a number of producers making wines from chardonnay and pinot noir that are a reflection of both the sub region and the vineyard. It's interesting too to note that there are also a growing number of vineyards in Australia where the same fruit is being made into single vineyard wines by more than one producer. Lusatia Park with chardonnay and pinot noir in the cool upper Yarra and the Warner Vineyard dedicated to shiraz in in Beechworth are two such examples.

In many ways nothing sums up the changes in Australia over the past decade better than the results of this country's most highly coveted award, the Jimmy Watson Memorial Trophy. It has gone from being awarded to the best one-year-old wine in show to the best one- or two-year-old, and it can now only be won by a finished wine. Previous winners included barrel or show samples that didn't always represent the final blend. More importantly, the style of wine getting the gong has changed dramatically. Traditionally the domain of blockbuster wines from the Barossa, McLaren Vale and Coonawarra, the prize in recent times has gone to wines from cooler regions such as the Grampian in Central Victoria, Canberra, Tasmania and the Mornington Peninsula.

The 2013 Jimmy Watson trophy judging was both a watershed moment for the award and for pinot noir as for the first time in its 52-year history, the Jimmy Watson went to a pinot, the Yabby Lake Block 1 2012. The deep, darkly fruited wine was among the greatest line-up of pinots seen at an Australian wine show with the Yabby taking out the Jimmy and the lighter, more perfumed Giant Steps Applejack Pinot Noir 2012 winning the James Halliday trophy for best pinot in the same competition. And this year, the award went to another Pinot (won by Home Hill) this time from Tasmania which, having promised so much for so long now is now on the cusp of producing consistently good chardonnay, riesling, pinot noir and Australia's finest sparkling or traditional method wines.

After fretting that he'd never be able to drink all the wines he'd collected, the late French-born, London-based wine merchant and writer Andre Simon is said to have had only one bottle of wine left in his cellar when he died in 1970. The Australian wine writer James Halliday, whose own cellar reputedly runs to 20,000 bottles, maintains, tongue in cheek, that having only one bottle left was what caused Simon's death. Whichever man got it right, there is little doubt that collecting and cellaring wine – if done properly – is one of life's great joys and there has never been a better time to buy, enjoy or cellar Australian wine.