

# Australian wine trailblazers

*Selector Magazine*

The story of Europe's great wine regions is a tale of tradition and heritage. Many wine regions of the Mediterranean have grown vines since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In the Middle Ages, the great Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries refined winemaking and their methods were used until modern times. The story of Australian wine is entirely different. It is perhaps best understood through looking at some of its trailblazers.

## EARLY TRAILBLAZERS

Unlike Europe or America, Australia has no native grape vines. Our first vines came via the Cape of Good Hope with Arthur Philip. They were planted at Farm Cove in what is now the Botanical Gardens. They didn't last and John Macarthur is credited with the first commercial winemaking out of Camden Park, south west of Sydney.

Having brought vine cuttings from France and Spain, James Busby is referred to as the 'father' of Australian wine. Most notable of his collection was Syrah from the Northern Rhône. Renamed Shiraz, it is now Australia's most planted varietal.

Families of early settlers were trailblazers in the industry. Many of the names are still among Australia's best known brands today: the Penfolds and Hill-Smiths (Yalumba) of Barossa, the Henschkes of Eden Valley, the Hardys and the Hamiltons in McLaren Vale, Tullochs of the Hunter, and Campbells of Rutherglen.

The Hunter Valley, Australia's oldest wine region, has seen its share of early trailblazers. Most famous is Maurice O'Shea who, with an Irish father and a French mother, had the right pedigree for the drinks industry! He started Mount Pleasant in 1921 and is celebrated for his blending techniques and sophisticated use of oak. The few remaining wines he made from the 1940s and 1950s are almost priceless today. Mount Pleasant's flagship red wine 'The Maurice O'Shea' is named in his honour.

Karl Stockhausen, a German emigrant, fell into winemaking when he got a cellar hand job at Lindeman's Ben Ean winery at Pokolbin. Karl, co-Chairman of the Wine Selectors Tasting Panel, went on to make some of the greatest Lindeman's Hunter wines, such as the Shiraz-based Lindeman's Hunter River Burgundies and Hunter River Chablis, made from Semillon. Today, he's recognised as a Hunter Valley Living Legend.

Of course, no story of early trailblazers would be complete without mentioning Max Schubert, who dreamt of making a great Australian wine comparable in quality to the best of Bordeaux. He kept his early experiments secret from the Penfolds family, who wanted their winemaker to continue making the Ports and Sherries for which they were renowned. The success of what is now Australia's most famous wine, Penfolds Grange, helped take the industry on the trajectory from the 1960s, where 80 percent of Australian wines were fortified, to today, where table wines dominate our wine landscape.

## TRAILBLAZERS OF THE MODERN ERA

The Australian wine industry of today is all about regionality, variety, prestigious single varietal wines and complex, beguiling blends, not to mention formidable Sparklings that are challenging even the best fizz from France. There are literally hundreds of trailblazers from every wine region across the country, who have helped shape our remarkable vinous climate. We've highlighted a few of the key characters of this journey.



### GARRY CRITTENDEN

Garry Crittenden, along with wife Margaret, established what is now called Crittenden Estate in the Mornington Peninsula in 1982. The Crittendens were one of the region's pioneer's, and the Mornington Peninsula now boasts over 50 cellar doors. Garry was one of the earliest experimenters with Italian grapes, planting Piedmontese varieties Nebbiolo, Dolcetto, Barbera and Arneis.

In 1999, Garry co-authored a book titled Italian winegrape varieties in Australia. Crittenden Estate now also offers a range of Iberian wines under the Los Hermanos label. This was far ahead of its time when you consider that Italian and Spanish varieties have only become mainstream in the last five years. This being said, Crittenden Estate, like the Mornington generally, is best known for its Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

### MURRAY TYRRELL



In 1959, Murray Tyrrell took over the Tyrrell's family winery, in the Hunter Valley, which was founded in 1858. After having been introduced to French Chardonnay by his good friend and fellow Hunter Valley winemaker, Len Evans, Murray pioneered Australia's first commercial Chardonnay in the early 1970s.

The importance of this varietal can hardly be overstated. Australian Chardonnay went on to become the wine style that the world fell in love with in the 1980s and 1990s, propelling Australia to number 1 in the UK wine market. It is still by far our most planted white varietal. Tyrrell was also an unofficial spokesman for the Hunter, promoting tourism and seemingly declaring every vintage as the vintage of the century!

### BRIAN CROSER



Petaluma founder Brian Croser is one of Australia's mostly highly awarded winemakers. He was a highly influential lecturer in the 1970s and 1980s at Riverina College (now Charles Sturt University), and as winemaker, he was noted for his focus on preserving fruit flavour through ultra-clean and strictly anaerobic winemaking techniques. This focus on 'clean wine' gave Australian wines a consistency of quality and a competitive advantage over old world wines for many years.

Brian was also ahead of his time in his conviction of planting the right varieties in the right locations. With Petaluma, he planted Cabernet and Merlot in Coonawarra, Riesling in Clare Valley, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in the Adelaide Hills with the coldest sites being selected for Croser Sparkling. Brian now runs Tapanappa wines, in one of South Australia's coolest and most pristine sites in the Adelaide Hills.

### VANYA CULLEN

While politicians in Canberra jawbone about climate change and environmental protection, trailblazing winemaker Vanya Cullen has been practising sustainability for years.

Vanya's parents Kevin and Diana Cullen were pioneers in establishing the Margaret River wine region about 50 years ago, along with Tom Cullity of Vasse Felix, Bill Pannell of Moss Wood and a handful of others. Vanya has built on this legacy through her passion for the land and its connection to her wine. Cullen Wines is certified biodynamic, as well as being the first carbon neutral winery in Australia. Vanya's zeal is to make great wine in harmony with 'mother earth' and in rhythm with nature. Admirers range from leading UK wine critic Jancis Robinson to celebrity cook Nigella Lawson.

### GARY FARR

Gary Farr joined Bannockburn Winery in Geelong in 1978, in what was then virgin wine territory. In 1983, he made his first visit to the Burgundy region of France at vintage time to study their winemaking techniques. Gary was so fascinated by the differences in approach he went on to spend 12 vintages in Burgundy. Applying what he learnt to the unique terroir of Geelong, Gary has made some of the most sought after Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in Australia under his own "By Farr" label. An unrelenting focus on quality – taking low yields from the vineyard and allowing longer fermentations were not decisions that thrill the accountants, but make the difference at By Farr.

### ED CARR

Ed Carr is the unquestioned king of Australian Sparkling wine. He has worked at Hardy's/ Accolade since 1994, overseeing their Sparkling wine program. The Arras range was one of the first Australian Sparkling wines released after longer periods on less. This reflected Ed's ambition to make Australian Sparkling wines of comparable quality to what is made in Champagne.

The quest to make the best led him to Tasmania, which has been the source of all Arras wine since 1998. His championing of longer bottle ageing and the focus on cool climate Tasmanian fruit has pushed the quality of Australian Sparkling wine from the cheap and cheerful to world class.

## AN EXCITING FUTURE

Australia continues to produce trailblazers of wine. Surfer punk winemaker Taras Ochota, the lo-fi nouse of Jo Perry, Gippsland Pinot guru William Downie, West Australian serial award winner Larry Cherubino, Sparkling wine specialist Fran Austin and Natalie Fryer, as well as Barossan young gun Faswer McKinley, could all be featured in a trailblazers of the future article.

These and other innovators will continue to raise standards and disrupt norms, sometimes even challenging our ideas about how wine should taste. With the trail still blazing, the future of Australian wine is very exciting indeed.

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