



VASSE FELIX

WINEMAKER OF THE YEAR



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2012

It's time to meet the first four finalists from this year's compelling field of talent.

By the end of the 15th year of presenting this major Australian award, *Gourmet Traveller WINE* will have told the story of more than 120 women and men who have graced this country's landscape transforming quality grapes into wines that have ranged from daringly cutting edge to dazzlingly traditional, from superb to sublime: bubbly, whites and reds across the full spectrum, stickies and fortifieds.

These are hard years for the industry, but our awards focus on the good-news stories, placing the spotlight on individuals, telling about those with whom they have toiled and the wineries and regions in which they work.

The judges are a constant, comprising myself Peter Forrestal (chairman), Peter Bourne, Nick Bulleid MW, Andrew Caillard MW, Huon Hooke and Sophie Otton. We have concentrated on the quality of wines produced in the recent past – 18 months or so. We all taste exhaustively, regularly noting wines that have stopped us in our tracks and the winemakers who have crafted them.

Two of the winemakers who are reviewed in this issue have already been finalists, Sandro Mosele in 2005 and Virginia Willcock in 2010. Mosele has attracted further attention because of the refinements he's made to his single-site chardonnays and pinots, as well as the work

he's done on Italian varietals. Willcock has been largely responsible for the continued rise of Vasse Felix and has carried all before her on the show circuit in the last few years, especially with her breathtakingly complex 2010 Vasse Felix Heytesbury Chardonnay.

An almost obsessive preoccupation with the vineyard is a feature of both of the first-time finalists profiled here: Rob Mann of Cape Mentelle and Timo Mayer of Gembrook Hill and his own label, Mayer. Interestingly, both winemakers have family backgrounds in wine that stretch back more than 100 years and their stories make compelling reading.

PETER FORRESTAL

VIRGINIA WILLCOCK

Vasse Felix

Second-time finalist Virginia Willcock is renowned for her energy, passion and attention to detail. And of course her incredible Margaret River wines speak for themselves, particularly her Heytesbury Chardonnay.

Young Virginia Willcock's first experience with grapes and wine came from the "toy vineyard" her father owned with friends at Bindoon, just north of Perth. It seems toys came big then in Western Australia, as the Salvado Spring vineyard had 12 acres of shiraz and grenache grapes which were sold to the Waldeck winery. On weekends, Virginia would join groups of mates to pick, prune and party, and she'd see all the fun her parents and their friends were having as they enjoyed "this rustic wine".

The 15 year-old Virginia was upset when her parents sold the vineyard, bringing the response from her father, "Well, you'd better study winemaking, then." And so it was off to the University of Adelaide in 1987, graduating in 1990, with a year's deferral to get her hands dirty in the vineyard and winery at Capel Vale. After Adelaide she decided to work a vintage in Margaret River at Redgate, where "they soon called me assistant winemaker", while she "lived out of Bryce's book (Dr Bryce Rankine's textbook on winemaking) and lots of phone calls". She ended up staying for four years. This was clearly a formative period for Willcock and forged her love of Margaret River.

Looking for overseas experience, she started working as a flying winemaker in Europe with Kym Milne MW. Milne remembers her as passionate, focused and seriously hard-working. "She did a terrific job - high volume stuff and small, barrigue-aged quantities, and made some really good wines. She had the technical skills and communication, too. She's

naturally gregarious and might not have spoken much of their language, but got the message across with her enthusiasm."

She worked two vintages in Trento and one in Sicily and remembers her excitement about the unfamiliar varieties and the wine diversity. Interspersed with these Northern Hemisphere sojourns were vintages at Cloudy Bay in 1996 and two at Cape Mentelle in 1995 and 1997. The latter cemented her love of Margaret River, so she gained

Most of our fermentations aren't inoculated, including all the chardonnay and the premium shiraz, cabernet and malbec - so just the yeast from the vineyard. We have responsibilities and with our love of the Margaret River region it's very easy to nurture the vines as part of their environment."

Matching grape variety to soil type and then using the right canopy management has been a keen thrust for Willcock. She remembers walking around the vineyard not long

"Vasse Felix is a vinous gem, shining better than ever in the creative hands of Virginia Willcock. Precision, vigour and drive are the hallmarks of her Heytesbury wines - and indeed, Willcock herself." PETER BOURNE

full-time positions first with contract winemaker Selwyn Wines and later with a group of smaller wineries, including Chestnut Grove and Hay Shed Hill. She joined Vasse Felix as chief winemaker in 2006.

How was it that an Italian-leaning winemaker became so passionate about Margaret River, a place infused almost entirely with French grape varieties? "Travelling is all about finding and bringing back knowledge,"

Willcock replies. "I worked in three different regions and the biggest point was the diversity in tannin structure and flavour profiles. What I learnt about tannins was what cabernet could achieve without emulating Bordeaux. Margaret River is a relatively young region and we are still learning how to nurture the fruit. Cabernet here can give you tannins that are lush like silk and then a really big wallop on the finish."

What does she find so special about Margaret River? "First, we have a very healthy environment, so often less is better. We're learning what we can get away with not doing. We don't use artificial fertilisers, just chook poo, mulch and grape marc.

after arriving and saying, "What's that doing there? Pull it out!"

Paul Holmes à Court hesitated when I asked him about his colleague at Vasse Felix, "because there's so much to say. She's passionate. She really does care about the end product and giving everything attention to detail. Before we appointed her, I could see what she'd done in other jobs with limited resources and was determined to give her the chance to show what she could really do. She believes you're only as good as your worst wine. Passion, energy and detail - that pretty much sums her up."

With all that being said, what challenges remain after achieving so much at Vasse Felix in six short years? "There's never a day when we can't find new things to do to get the most beautiful representation of Margaret River in the bottle," she replies. "I'd love to see the day when we can underline the uniqueness of each region, when we can drop the word 'Australia' from our labels and just have the regional name, with a less complicated range and stronger focus."

It seems the past six years were just the beginning. Margaret River grapes couldn't be in better hands. NICK BULLEID MW



CONFIDENT STYLE
The fertile vines at Vasse Felix in Margaret River. Above: a true force of nature - Virginia Willcock.



VITAL STATISTICS

REGION: Margaret River
YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 25
ANNUAL CRUSH: 2000 tonnes
STANDOUT WINE: Vasse Felix Heytesbury Chardonnay

