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Jancis Robinson

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Looking back at Australian Chardonnay

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See *[Australian Rieslings, and Chardonnays compared](#)* for the tasting notes of the

retrospective of Tiers Chardonnay described below.

I think it was Xavier Bizot who had the idea of celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the planting of the Tiers vineyard in the Adelaide Hills in 1979. He is the son-in-law of Brian Croser, who initially planted the vines for his nascent Petaluma wine operation. Much wine has flowed under the bridge since then, including the sale of Petaluma in 2001 to Asian brewers Lion Nathan and the establishment of the Croser family's own Tapanappa label in the old Petaluma winery from 2015. Ann and Brian Croser have always lived overlooking Tiers and the winery and she, a cytogeneticist, accountant and, most importantly, lawyer, was determined they would not have to move. Petaluma now have their own winery and restaurant in nearby Woodside and the Tiers vineyard is shared between Tapanappa and Petaluma, so each year you can buy two versions of the same wine. Further confusion: Petaluma own the sparkling wine known as Croser.

Xavier is married to Lucy Croser (in the middle of the picture below) and is son of the late Christian Bizot of Bollinger champagne, Bollinger having invested in Tapanappa when it started up in 2003. Some might have waited until the fortieth anniversary of the first vintage of Tiers, in 2024, but perhaps Xavier is a young man in a hurry. A traditional-method sparkling wine made from Chardonnay in the Tapanappa winery, called Daosa, is his personal project.



In any case I was very glad that 2019 had been chosen for the celebratory tasting since it coincided with when I was in Australia to launch the new, eighth edition of *The World*

Atlas of Wine and [my wine glass](#). On a beautiful spring day at the end of October, 18 of us sat down in the Tapanappa cellar door overlooking the vineyard to taste selected vintages of Tiers Chardonnay, shown above. We were also treated to some other great Chardonnays from Burgundy and California carefully selected by Croser and, over lunch, a few more highlights from the Tapanappa stable and French counterparts. The particular vintages chosen were dictated partly by stock levels, and also by the fact that Tiers is not made every year.

Croser explained that in a typical year 500 cases of Tiers Chardonnay are made but that in 2020 they expected to produce only about 200 cases, thanks to frost in late September for the first time since 2007 that was likely to halve the yield. See his recent [South Australia 2020 – unforgettable](#).

Chardonnay history

We revisited the story of how Chardonnay arrived in Australia (see [The story of a Chardonnay clone](#) and [Chardonnay clones updated](#)). The first varietal Chardonnays in Australia were both made in 1971, one from Craigmoor in Mudgee, an early hotspot for the variety, and the famous Vat 47 from Tyrrell's in the Hunter Valley. John Brocksopp, who would go on to be the gifted original viticulturist at Leeuwin Estate in Margaret River, planted it in Cowra, New South Wales, in 1970 or 1971. A Chardonnay was also supposedly planted as early as 1966 in the Gehrig vineyard in Rutherglen, Victoria – although James Halliday in his 1985 *Australian Wine Compendium* maintains it was eventually identified as Chenin Blanc.

At an event in London in September 2019 co-hosted by Yalumba, Bruce Tyrrell claimed that their bottling of Chardonnay known as HVD (standing for Hunter Valley Distillery), is based on a two-acre block of vines planted in 1908, which may represent 'the oldest Chardonnay vines on the globe. Penfolds leased the vineyard and it was run by Brian McGuigan's dad. We bought it on 27 December 1982. We made wine from it in the 1980s but got serious about what we call "the Penfold clone" from 2009 onwards.' According to many accounts, Murray Tyrrell bought the cuttings for Vat 47 Chardonnay from Mudgee but his son Bruce claims this is incorrect and that Graham Gregory, influential deputy director general of New South Wales Agriculture, maintained that the plant material had actually been sourced, perhaps discreetly, in the HVD vineyard.

Chardonnay arrived in South Australia in 1968, the OF clone sent from the University of California at Davis. This was also known as FPS Chardonnay 2A and was the version of Chardonnay 1 that had been heat-treated (for virus) by Professor Harold Olmo – although Olmo decided 2A was virused too and eliminated it from the Davis nursery in 1969.

What is clear from all this complicated plant history is that Chardonnay was still quite a novel concept in 1979 when the Tiers vineyard was planted. ‘Back in 1979 we thought Chardonnay was Lebanese!’ remembered Croser.

He and Ann had returned to Australia from studies at Davis in California in 1972/73 having fallen in love with ‘mesmerising’ California Chardonnay with its ‘nearly unctuous texture and generous flavours’. Having listened to his UCD professors, some of whom called it Pinot Chardonnay then, Croser was sure ‘the variety demanded to be grown in the very coolest viticultural regions... In 1978 we purchased a ruined market garden in the middle of the Piccadilly Valley in the Adelaide Hills, the very epicentre of high rainfall and low temperature in South Australia, with 1,200 mm [47 in] of rain [in an average year] and a long-term heat summation of 1175 °C days.

‘The first task in 1978 was to build the Adelaide Hills’ first winery and have it ready for the 1979 vintage. [They vinified fruit from the Evans Vineyard in Coonawarra and Hanlin Hill vineyard in the Clare Valley where Brian was brought up.] The second, in 1979, was to clear the blackberries and plant the Tiers Vineyard with Chardonnay on radically close spacing and vertical canopy. In one of life’s coincidences I chose the OF clone of Chardonnay from the nursery of the three that were then available. Little did I know then, OF signifies Old Farm and refers to the University of California, Davis, origins of the clone from the first experimental vineyard on the Armstrong Vineyard before Harold Olmo began the new FPS vineyard in the 1950s.’

Because of the seminal role played by California Chardonnay in the genesis of the Tiers vineyard, Croser chose to include examples from Stony Hill, Hanzell, Mount Eden and Hyde de Villaine (in this case HDV rather than Tyrrell’s HVD) in his celebratory tasting, all of them based on the famous Wente clone except for the Mount Eden Chardonnay, which is based on the original Paul Masson selections brought to the Santa Cruz Mountains from Burgundy in 1900. See [The story of California Chardonnay – part 1](#) for

more details of California Chardonnay clones.

Tiers of joy

Croser assured us that all of the Tiers Chardonnays had been made in exactly the same way, so the differences between them were the result only of vintage variation and age. The alcohol levels of all the vintages are remarkably similar because they pick simply on ripeness.

I've tasted Croser's Tiers Chardonnay many a time over the years and have always found considerable tension in it – sometimes to the point of introversion when the wines are young. I wondered whether the deliberately suppressed malolactic conversion is a factor. He did admit there was a little bit of malo conversion in some of these wines, 'but I'm not sure I really like malo character'. There is definitely no malo in the later vintages, apparently, in which the pH is consistently low. 'We struggle for pHs of 3.' Acid additions were described as 'rare'.

Spending a bit of time here reminded me just how cool the Adelaide Hills can be (despite the catastrophic bushfires in late 2019). Croser explained that the heat summation in that other source of fine Australian Chardonnay, Margaret River, is 1500 °C days whereas in the Adelaide Hills it is often below 1200 °C days. In view of this chilly climate, they have not adopted the fruit shading that is becoming increasingly popular in warmer wine regions, but are pruning ever harder. 'Vines are cleverer than us', Xavier assured us.

They did replant the parcel of vineyard immediately below the house in 2003 to Dijon clones on rootstocks and reoriented the rows to north–south but apparently what we tasted was strictly the old OF clone.

A discussion as digestif

Those of us invited to the day-long celebration had been sent three questions to consider in advance, under the provocative title 'Vignerons' revenge'. Croser had much to get off his chest about the dubious value of the 100-point scoring system for wine. In his first question he railed against 'the apparent compression of scores in the 96 to 100 range. What might replace it that can simply capture the attention of short-attention-span consumers but give them richer context for buying decisions?' Huon Hooke (second left in the picture at the top of this article) argued forcefully in favour of words rather than

numbers, as is the wont of us writers. He agreed that there had been a distinct ratings creep upwards. Journalist Nick Ryan made the point that scores were a powerful monetiser. Wine writer Tyson Stelzer from Queensland felt that points were still relevant because there are so many consumers who find them useful, and Sydney wine buyer and MS Frank Moreau pointed out that many people simply look up a wine's score on their phones. Retailer Michael Andrewarthar of East End Cellars was firmly of the opinion that in the context of his operation, points matter.

So, little balm for Croser there. But the wines did their stuff, as you can see in [Australian Rieslings, and Chardonnays compared.](#)