

A FIGHTER FOR FINE WINE

There have been few more influential figures in the modern history of Australian wine than Brian Croser, whose long and varied career has seen him head up winemaking at Hardy's and Lion Nathan, found and lead two leading boutique South Australian estates, and help shape the way wine science is taught in the country. Margaret Rand meets an intellectual powerhouse with an unwavering commitment to his belief in Australia as a fine-wine nation

Two wasted decades," says Brian Croser. "I will never forgive them."

He's not in belligerent mode—just reflecting on a career that spans the entire modern Australian wine industry. He returned from UC Davis, where he was taught by the greats of the previous generation late in their careers, to Australia in 1973. When we met in 2018, he was in the middle of a long tour of the northern hemisphere, catching up with the friends of a lifetime: Jean-Michel Cazes, Andrew Jefford, Alessandro Ceretto, Jacques Lurton, Hugh Ryman. I didn't ask him, but I'll bet he's within six degrees of separation of not only every winemaker in the Western world but the First Fleet founders of the Australian wine industry as well. Sorry, Brian. I'm not trying to make you feel old.

From that perspective, two wasted decades doesn't seem that long. The decades in question are the ones when big brands ruled and pursued a commodity agenda. "It would have been more even progress if we had recognized that branded commodity wine is not the same as great wine. Big companies love to obfuscate. They didn't want two classes of Australian wine; they blurred any effort to create a picture of fine wine as opposed to commodity. For that I will never forgive them. It was total, irresponsible disregard of the long-term welfare of the wine community."

Croser has never wavered. His objectives have never changed, nor his opinions; he seems to have arrived fully formed, a leader from day one, so outspoken and so single-minded that if he announced he'd been sent to planet Earth by higher beings to guide Australian wine, you wouldn't be that surprised. In fact, he's a farm boy from near Coonawarra. He says so, so it must be true.

Teasing over. But it is remarkable how focused and how single-minded he has been—and continues to be. He decided at the age of 14 or 15 that he wanted to work in wine, which is quite something given that his family hardly drank the stuff. His ancestors had arrived in Australia in 1868, and his family had farmed ever since. From when Croser was six until he was 14, they lived in Clare, and friends' families had vineyards;

"I probably first tasted wine at eight or nine. I can't remember not liking it."

Young Croser was blessed with a teacher with aspirations for him, and at 14 or 15 he decided that "wine encapsulated a lot of things that I was interested in: microbiology, plant physiology." He wasn't interested in animals, though we agree that sheep are perfectly intelligent creatures and much maligned. (Croser had a lamb-rearing business at one point, which he sold in 2016.) He engaged in "scientific" experiments with wine with a friend who was also head prefect, but he regarded Roseworthy as a technical college and instead went to Adelaide university to read agricultural science, with the aim of becoming a winemaker. "My mates there were all doing animals or crops. I did horticulture and microbiology; all of that was unfashionable."

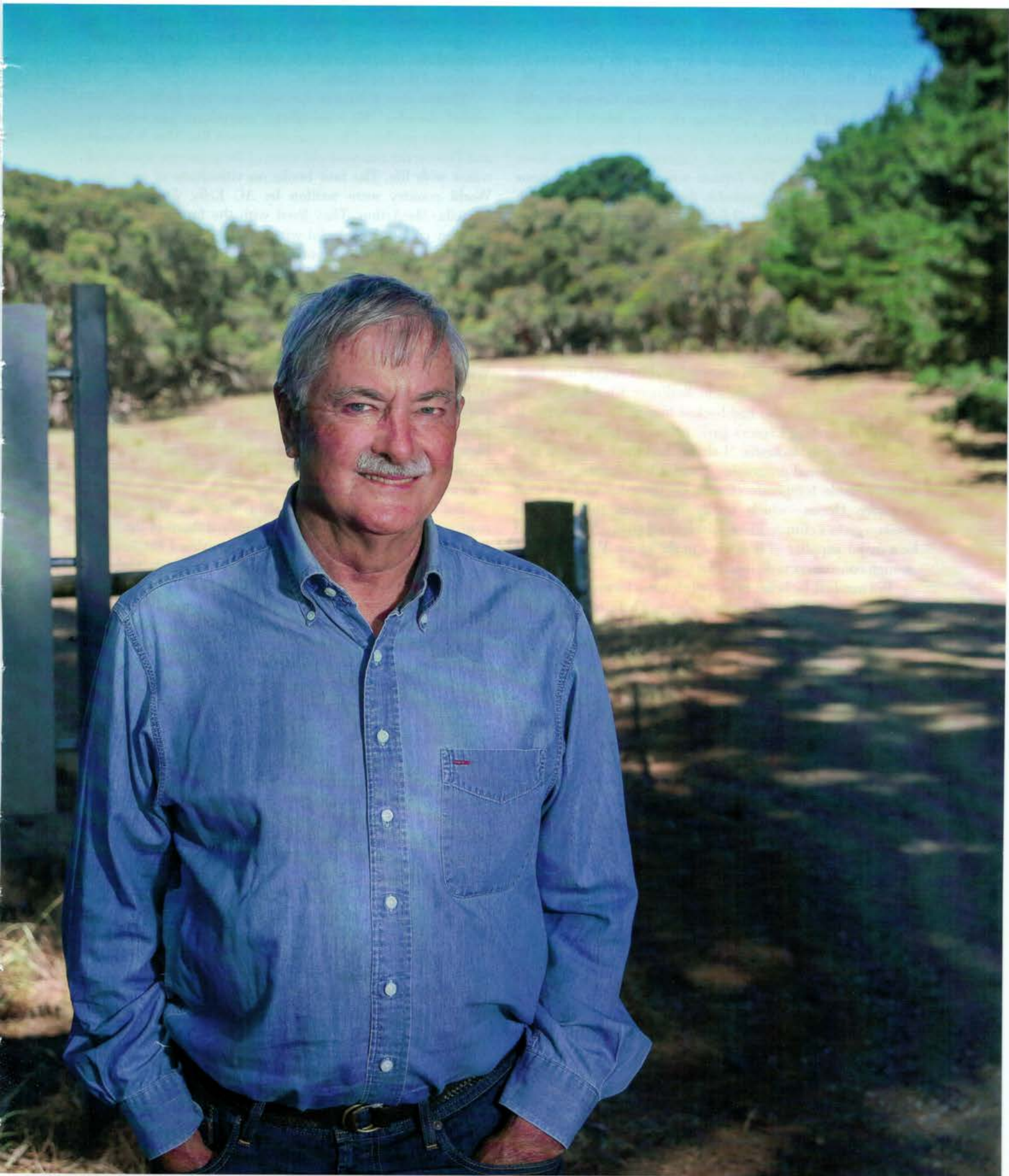
He then approached Tom Hardy and said he'd like to work with him. "His son was doing the same degree, one year behind. Tom said, 'Fine, we want young people,' and his winemaker was retiring. I said, 'The deal is, you send me to California, to UCD.'"

Tom agreed to this as well. By now Brian was married to Ann, a biochemist. At UC Davis, "I had the high privilege of working with men at the end of their academic lives: Winkler, Maynard Amerine; Vernon Singleton, the greatest phenolic chemist ever." Amerine had joined UCD soon after Repeal—that's not many degrees of separation from the start of the modern California industry, either. "I look back and think how lucky I was."

Believing in Australia

In 1973, Croser returned to Australia with a huge admiration for Chardonnay. "It hardly existed in Australia then; there were 20 acres [8ha], if that. I was determined to find the right place to grow Chardonnay and make wine of the same status as Phelps, Freemark Abbey, Chalk Hill, and Mondavi. The boutique industry was starting in California, and it was an inspiration;

Opposite: Brian Croser at Foggy Hill Vineyard on Maylands Farm at Parawa on the Southern Fleurieu Peninsula, where he planted Pinot Noir for Tapanappa from 2003.



there was a feeling of being part of something that was just starting. I decided there was a future for that in Australia."

Croser reckons that there were 50 or 60 producers in Australia then, all family-owned, and 30-odd regions, mostly hot. The vines were mostly Muscat, Sultana, Grenache, a bit of Shiraz, and Riesling. Anything else was labeled "exotic." "Hardy's had a wonderful old vineyard with Sauvignon Blanc from Yquem, supposedly, and Cabernet Sauvignon from Latour, supposedly." The former was made into a liqueur Sauvignon, which was "probably the first varietal wine from Hardy's." But not for long. "I felt I was changing the industry at Hardy's." He was doing yeast selection and using new ways of making reds. He was using closer spacing in the vineyards. "We turned the whole thing around in two or three years."

At which point, in 1976, he started not just the wine science course at Riverina College, which became Charles Sturt University, but also Petaluma. The history of Petaluma is well documented, as are those of Tapanappa, founded in 2002, and Croser's Oregon vineyard and its Argyle fizz, both backed by the Cazes family and Bollinger Champagne, the same shareholders who had backed him at Petaluma. But it is worth reiterating Croser's basic principles here. They're to do with belief in Australia: "I always had the conviction that Australia's national geographical attributes, climate and soils, its very stable temperate climate on the edge of the Great Southern Ocean—which totally influences the southern coasts—gives a climate [the equivalent of] 40–45°N. We should be a major supplier of fine wine to the globe. We don't have enough consumers to do it just for ourselves."

In a nutshell, he believes in cool climates for noble varieties, and the right vines in the right places. That's not especially controversial, you might think, but that would be to forget the journey that Australian wine has been on. To tell the story, he uses the example of Cabernet, which, incidentally, is the only topic on which he says he has ever changed his opinions—or, to be accurate, "where I have been perceived to change."

"In 1970s Australia, Cabernet was king of the reds and Riesling queen of the whites, and there wasn't much Cabernet. [...] When I went to California and Bordeaux, I saw the other side: appropriate climates and more aromatic, leafy wines. With Petaluma, my aim was to make the most Bordeaux/Santa Cruz Mountains-like wine. My hero is Ridge Montebello. In the '80s, there was some pyrazine, leafy character in the reds, [which we got] by managing them differently. I went after that. Eventually, Petaluma and Coonawarra produced too much pyrazine, and we toned that down, opened the vines out, leaf-stripped, and modulated it; we gained cassis, elegant flavors." Those wines, he says, can still be put alongside first growths.

"In the '90s, everyone was talking of the big-company push to be dominant in fine wine in Australia and of planting all over Australia in cool climates. The wines were the critics' choice of the day, and they were so overoaked. This was before Robert Parker discovered Australia; it was big-company work. The big companies planted vineyards, made wine, but then couldn't sell it, and so they walked away from their contracts. It was very destructive.

"Then came Robert Parker. A friend of his found the 'best' growers and producers for him. It was a period of monstrous, overripe Shiraz from the wrong locations. He even said that

Australian cool-climate wines were pale shadows of their European equivalents. We made Petaluma Coonawarra that outlived the decade; very few of those overripe Cabernets have stood the test of time."

There's also a lament for what was lost in those "two wasted decades." He remembers "marvelous '50s wines in the cellars produced by renaissance men like Max Schubert and Preece; the 100-year-old vines of the pioneers, wonderful wines with life. The best books on viticulture of any New World country were written by AC Kelly, James Busby, Costella, MacArthur. They lived with the fortified industry, but they created wonderful wines in the '50s and '60s, then the '70s, and then the corporations took over. They took over the companies first and then the marketplace. The most influential thing in the '90s and '00s was the supermarkets."

And this is not just hindsight speaking. All through his career Croser has been a fighter for fine wine, never afraid to stick his head over the parapet. "I remember an AGM of the Wine & Brandy Association when the big companies were taking over. We needed a regional definition system, and we put forward all the arguments—protecting intellectual property, protection of regions, getting out of the era of blending. They held a vote, and two thirds of the room was against it. I went home and cried." The following year, however, it went through.

But of course Croser has had his time as a big-company man as well. Given his role as a professional thorn-in-the-flesh, it was surprising that when Lion Nathan nabbed Petaluma in a hostile takeover in 2001 he agreed to work for it. "Only for four years," he says, "and with no executive role. I was just the winemaker for Petaluma. I did it because they owned the winery at the bottom of my garden and were taking fruit from my vineyards. In 2006 I convinced them that they had no future on the site because they didn't own the road in. I convinced them that they should sell it. It was a huge relief to me to do that." He continued to lease vineyards to Lion Nathan until it moved out in 2014. "I got my winery back; it was fantastic." He's no longer involved with Petaluma; Tapanappa was the replacement baby.

The model that led to the buyout—going public in 1992 with a view to buying other businesses, namely Mitchelton and Knappstein—was, he says, the right model. The idea was that businesses that were acquired would be kept separate and allowed to run themselves to budgets that they had estimated. "It worked beautifully," he says. But the takeover meant central finance, central control, central winemaking—and vitality was lost. "\$800 million worth of acquisitions was turned into \$100 million worth of sale in less than a decade."

Did he enjoy those four years? He grins. "You can imagine how much I enjoyed the involvement of HR..."

Moderation in everything

He appears now to be a contented man; less abrasive, though perhaps that's because he was basically on holiday when we met and with wine styles back where they should be. "I knew fashion would swing again. You know when the pendulum has swung too far and who is swinging it. The blockbuster styles were patently wrong and for all the wrong motives, ignoring and belittling the best of the Australian industry. I hated that. You know it's wrong, you know it will swing back, and you hope it will stop in the middle. It's coming back to an

essential pathway, which is moderation in everything, to allow terroirs to be identifiable through the terroirs best suited to them. Not too much oak, not too much alcohol, not too much tannin; all the 'toos' have become more moderate."

So, what can get him going now? Easy: natural wines. He describes the natural-wine movement as "throwing out the rulebook and starting again, using other people's vineyards, and appealing to a limited number of wildly enthusiastic consumers in it for spiritual reasons rather than a taste adventure. It's a yearning to get closer to nature." Well, that's harmless enough, surely? "It's a vibrant and colorful dimension, representing something dynamic," he agrees. But "I resent that it says all the rest of us are not natural—that's totally wrong—and that natural wines are the only true expression of terroir, achieved by accidental winemaking, which offends me highly." Given that he's spent his career fighting for terroir, you can see why he'd object to being told that conventional winemaking is not the way to do it.

"It's a lot to do with ego," he adds; "the biggest beard, the most nonconformist." Will natural wines take over the world? No, is the short answer. The traditional great wines of the world will continue to be "treasured by those who can afford them. These kids can't afford them now, but if they get richer... They are capitalists in the extreme. They know how to work markets. They will be like us one day."

At which point one is tempted to quote Edgar at the end of *King Lear*: "The oldest hath borne most. We that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long." The transformation of Australian wine that Croser has lived through "won't happen again, ever. It was waking from a 50-year slumber, and it has been a joy to be part of it. Things that worked then won't work now; it's a different community, a different industry."

I've said before how Croser's views have been immovable through all those changes. He doesn't find it at all remarkable. "Experience teaches you many things: You're enriched by it, and you become more certain of what you do. But my private goals, the things that drive me, have not changed. [...] My passion has been the right climate and the right soil, the right aspect, to get the best out of each variety." The only hiccup was that takeover. At the time, he was quoted as saying, "I had the future worked out. I had the same objectives for 27 years. Now there's a feeling of aimlessness when I wake up in the morning." Now he's back on track. "My palate hasn't changed. When I read back [past tasting notes], nothing much has changed." (Those notes presumably include the notes from a vertical of Grange he did with Max Schubert in the late '70s; he searched for them for years in his files and eventually found them under O—his secretary had misread Grange as Orange.)

"You can't get knocked off course, because you have already made up your mind where the next step is. It's about getting a vineyard to express its terroir through a variety and then observing small incremental changes that you can monitor year to year because you haven't been jerked off course; that's my mission. It's invulnerable to the swings of fashion and therefore to accusations of not joining the herd."

But you have to be sure you're right. Surprisingly, Croser says, "I'm full of self-doubt. I've spent my life trying to prove that Tiers is a distinguished site. What if it isn't? You don't get another 40 years. And what if it is? And what if I've really stuffed it up? That's what keeps me awake still."

"I'm a true skeptic; I won't accept things at face value. There's not enough true skepticism. Too much of what we are fed is fed as fact, which can be disputed, and we can all gain from that. There's not enough critical appraisal, and there's too much dogma"

He's also sensitive to criticism. "I was criticized for being an ultra-technical winemaker, and nothing could be further from the truth. I happened to have a very good yeast and the technology for getting it to grow, and somebody said I was making all Australian wine taste like my yeast. I wrote a furious rebuttal and showed it to Len [Evans], who said, 'File it under S, for Satisfaction.' I didn't send it." When Croser has been criticized, it has usually been for being over-technical and focusing on ultra-clean wine at the expense of character. His answer has been that ultra-clean wine has to come first; only then can you take risks.

Len Evans was probably his closest friend—"I miss him every day, [even if] his ambition for wine wasn't the same as mine"—and the list of friends he mentions at various points could easily fill a page. Christian Bizot, former family head of Bollinger; Ann—"She says she used to get sick of driving home from work, watching me drive the other way to go and kick someone into shape"; Tony Jordan—"a good confidante, he went his own way" (Croser and Jordan had a winemaking consultancy at one time); Ron Potter—"a great man, an engineer, found ways of making winery equipment cheaper and better"; the list goes on.

I could, in the past, have asked some of them what Croser's worst character trait is; instead, I asked him. "I think I'm perfect! I'm not intolerant; I'm not, as many people would say, a control freak. I love sharing responsibility." He thinks hard—very hard. "It would be that I can't see why people would not share my opinion. I've taught myself to look at things through the eyes of the other person, but even when I do that I still think I'm right."

And your best trait? "I love to learn and I love to teach. I'm very skeptical of the panacea of a single cause resulting in an effect in the biological world. It doesn't happen in biology. And it puts me on the other side of the cork-and-screwcap argument—it puts me on the side of cork. But I can see a place for both. It's a bit like being a climate-change denier. Climate change is utterly true, but it's way overemphasized in the industry as a factor. There are incremental effects, but there are weather influences other than climate change, like El Niño, La Niña, and the Southern Oscillation. I'm a true skeptic; I won't accept things at face value. There's not enough true skepticism. Too much of what we are fed is fed as fact, which can be disputed, and we can all gain from that. There's not enough critical appraisal, and there's too much dogma. Social media gets everyone moving as a herd, and it blunts skepticism and critical appraisal."

And if he ever wanted a motto that summed up his career (he could hang it over his desk, in pokerwork), it, too, might come from Edgar: "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." ■