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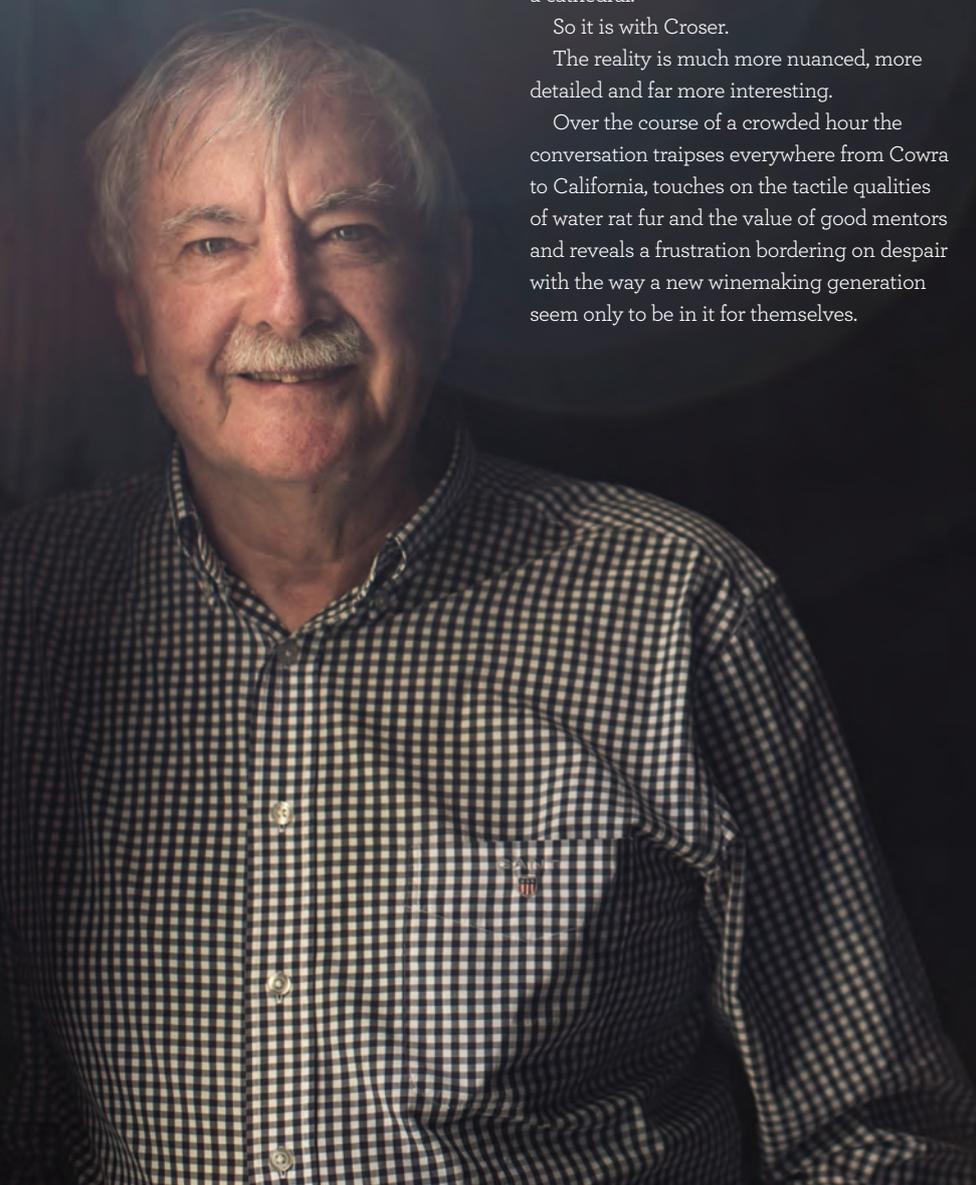




# IN A GOOD PLACE

**BRIAN CROSER REFLECTS ON THE PIONEERING DAYS, POLITICS,  
WINE INDUSTRY LEADERSHIP AND THE NEXT GENERATION.**

**WORDS NICK RYAN PHOTOS MIKE SMITH**



“Do you think you’re misunderstood?”  
Sitting down to chat with Brian Croser, I decide that’s as good a place as any to start.

When I first started in wine Croser seemed more an amalgam of other people’s opinions than someone real.

Everyone had a position on Croser.

Enigmatic. Autocratic. Maybe a little aloof.

A man made rigid by the strength of his convictions. Perhaps a little myopic too.

But if you took a dozen jungle tribesmen and asked them to draw you a cathedral you’d get a dozen different pictures but not one of them would be an accurate representation of a cathedral.

So it is with Croser.

The reality is much more nuanced, more detailed and far more interesting.

Over the course of a crowded hour the conversation traipses everywhere from Cowra to California, touches on the tactile qualities of water rat fur and the value of good mentors and reveals a frustration bordering on despair with the way a new winemaking generation seem only to be in it for themselves.

It begins with a long, thoughtful pause as Croser contemplates that opening question. It doesn’t throw him as I thought it would.

He’s clearly considered this before.

“Willfully, yes,” he says.

“I think they like to misrepresent me rather than misunderstand me.

“I don’t know why it happens but it’s happened all my life. Not just as a winemaker, but all the way back to a schoolboy.

“It’s always puzzled me but never worried me.

“I am opinionated, but this is an industry full of opinionated people, and I’ve at least been consistent.

“In the fifty years I’ve been in the industry I’ve had the same visions and same ambitions for the industry and for myself.

“That’s never deviated.”

The formation of that vision began in the fourth year of an Agricultural Science degree with a research project at the Waite Research Institute into the acid metabolism of grapes.

“If you want a simple biological titration of the heat in a region you simply measure the malic acid degradation, the amount and rate, and it exactly correlates with the heat summation of a region,” Croser explains.

“From that moment I knew I wanted to be involved in cool climate viticulture.

“At the time the industry was dominated by fortified and bag in box. Sultana and muscat and cochineal coloured sultana and muscat.

“I started to believe there’s another dimension to the Australian wine industry that would allow us to be as good or better than any country on the earth’s surface.

“I always believed that reputation would be built on our fine wines, not our bulk commodity wines, and I always believed it would be built around our cool climate areas.

“That belief has never wavered.”

The well documented early career stint in California sharpened that ambition and honed in the right vehicle to achieve it.

“Chardonnay was what I became really interested in at a time everyone was focused on riesling,” Croser says.

“But there just wasn’t much around at the time. Obviously there was a bit in the Hunter, and we brought cuttings from Mudgee to Cowra while I was at Charles Sturt in Wagga

that went into the Collee wines and eventually the first Petaluma wine, but apart from that and a little bit in Rutherglen, there just wasn't any around in the places I knew it would work best."

Croser and his wife Ann considered Tasmania and Mt Macedon before ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, settling on the site in the Piccadilly Valley that became Ground Zero for the Croser vision and is what we can see through the windows of the home office where this conversation takes place.

"The ambition is always to produce the best

Tiers 15, 16 and 17 in barrel, I can see in them all the things I want. Getting back to those generic descriptions, I can see a lot of aroma, I can see a lot of intensity, I can see a lot of complexity, I can see a lot of texture. They're balanced wines. We're getting to the point where our alcohols are 13-13.5 naturally with acids that are right in balance with the alcohol and fruit sweetness.

"They're long wines. They're unique.

"They're ticking those boxes.

"I'm really hopeful we're there before I draw my last breath."

**"I ALWAYS BELIEVED THAT REPUTATION WOULD BE BUILT ON OUR FINE WINES, NOT OUR BULK COMMODITY WINES, AND I ALWAYS BELIEVED IT WOULD BE BUILT AROUND OUR COOL CLIMATE AREAS. THAT BELIEF HAS NEVER WAVERED."**

wine in the world of its style and type," he says. "Now that sounds ridiculous because you're comparing apples and oranges, California chardonnay is not Piccadilly, is not Burgundy. That's true in one sense of the vocabulary of wine, the vocabulary in which there is the quite site specific stuff, minerality, I hate that term, or saying a wine smells like peaches, or it's got a quincey finish. All the stuff that relates to varietal and regional character. But there's a more generic description of quality, much more generic, which describes great wine regardless of where its grown. It's that generic description is what I'm talking about when I say I want to make the world's best."

Croser explains it as like ticking a series of boxes, a set of quality parameters inherent in all wine styles that when put together create great wines.

So, at this stage in his career, how close is he to ticking those boxes and fulfilling that ambition?

"If you'd asked me that two years ago after we got the winery back, which, by the way, has been a major determinant in how we're going, I would've said we're a long way off," Croser says.

"But right now I reckon I'd say we're creeping up on it. I would say Foggy Hill 17,

He then adds with a self-deprecating laugh, "But then I've always been well ahead of the curve when it comes to recognising our own quality."

With such a singular winemaking vision, it's hard to imagine this life could have veered off anywhere else but when I tell Croser that my brother in law, a veteran political journalist, says he never saw an industry lobbyist match the level of sophistication Croser deployed, he reveals things may have been different.

"There were a few soft attempts at recruitment," he says.

"Informal chats with (Alexander) Downer and (Ian) McLachlan.

"Ironic really because I had a terrible relationship with various Primary Industries Ministers or Spokesmen on that side. Peter Nixon, Doug Anthony, they were all up themselves so much.

"They didn't give a stuff about wine or grapes. If it didn't moo or baa they weren't interested... a bit like Barnaby now.

"I actually got on much better with the Labor guys. Primary Industries was a bit like purgatory for the ALP but I had a great relationship with John Kerin and thought Simon Crean was one of the great characters



to walk through the ministry.”

Those days are long behind him but Croser retains strong opinions on what the industry needs in terms of leadership.

And he feels it's not getting it.

“I'm quite accusatory of this younger generation of winemakers who might be innovative and all bright eyed and bushy tailed but they're certainly not putting their hands up to take responsibility at an industry level,” he says.

“On the few occasions they do, they haven't been taught to put self interest in the back pocket and sit on it at the table. It comes to the fore.

“Sure, that's a generalisation, and there will be exceptions, but on the whole that's been my observation of where this generation is.

“My generation was totally different, everyone knew they were fighting for a better industry, fighting for a change of varieties, change of regions, better image, new technologies.”

So have his generation's efforts meant a newer crop needn't work so hard?

“It's just as vital now as it was then,”

Croser says.

“You go back to the 50's and those wonderful Renaissance men like Schubert, Preece, Knappstein, Mann, Purbrick. The industry still didn't change despite the

business, but all those who inherit the reputation of a region that was built by those who came before. We didn't have that.

“We were pioneers. I don't say that as a self aggrandising thing. It's just where the industry was at the time and what needed to happen.

“But it needs to keep happening. The innovation at that level has stagnated.”

Croser sees clearly what has brought him to this point, and the philosophies shaped early remain in place today. The winemaking vision has remained constant even if the vagaries of the wine business have put a few bends and curves in the road along the way.

Would Brian Croser end up at the same spot if he could start all over from scratch?

“I like where we are now,” he says looking out the window but referring to more than just location.

“I like where we are now a lot. We're on the cusp.

“And besides, I don't have another fifty years to get here any other way.” ♦

## “THE AMBITION IS ALWAYS TO PRODUCE THE BEST WINE IN THE WORLD OF ITS STYLE AND TYPE.”

wonderful wines they were making. It was still dominated by fortifieds, poor varieties grown in wrong places, huge tonnages, not much material around capable of making great wine.

“And then we came along in the late 60's, people like Geoff Weaver, Pam Dunsford, Robin Day, we broke away from the Roseworthy orthodoxy. Because it was such an open field and none of us had been born with a silver spoon or handed a vineyard, a winery, a reputation, it was easier to be creative, to say I don't have anything to defend, I only have something to gain from the future.

“This current generation are inheritors. Not just those who take on generational wine

