

AUSTRALIAN CHARDONNAY: THE QUINTESSENTIAL GRAPE

No grape variety has played a more significant role in the development of modern Australian wine than Chardonnay. **Ken Gargett** traces the variety's history in Australia, explores the region-by-region differences, and picks out some of the country's finest Chardonnay producers and their wines





There is gold in those vineyards and gold in the bottles. Chardonnay today, despite its far distant origins, seems to be a quintessentially Australian grape. For many, it is the face of Aussie wine, and the success of the industry, at least in recent decades, has been built on its back. (Shiraz deserves a mention, too.) There was a time when Australian Chardonnay was simply those great-value, often rather simple, easy-drinking but full-of-flavor wines, often embalmed in oak, that the world loved—at least for a while. “Sunshine in a bottle” was a phrase often bandied about, and there are still plenty of examples. But Chardonnay in Australia, for serious wine lovers, is now almost unrecognizable from that old stereotype.

Australian Chardonnay has been around for only the blink of an eye, in vinous terms—for about as long as Margaret River has been a wine district. If one turns to what was probably the leading wine book of its day, Max Lake's *Classic Wines of Australia* (1966), Chardonnay gets a single mention (while Chasselas gets five and Crouchen/Clare Riesling half a dozen), but even then only as a synonym for the obscure Aucerot (DNA identification then resembling science fiction). At the time, apparently only Baileys of Glenrowan, more famous for fortified wines, was growing Aucerot; the story is that a member of the family brought some cuttings back from his sojourn in France during World War I and claimed them as Aucerot, which was later confirmed by well-known ampelographer François Robert de Castella. When Baileys was sold in the late 1980s, those vines were ripped out to be replaced by a more fashionable variety—Chardonnay, ironically.

The story of just how Chardonnay was established in this country, and who produced the first examples, is rather murky and varies a bit depending on who tells it. We looked at this in depth when we looked at Tyrrell's Vat 47 Chardonnay in *WFW* 61 (2018; pp.100–05). Between that, and the work done by Andrew Caillard MW in his astonishing three-volume *The Australian Ark*, we can now take things a little further.

Origins and pioneers

Conventional wisdom has the first Australian Chardonnay as the 1971 Vat 47 from Tyrrell's, just as it would suggest that the Hunter Valley is one of the last places in Australia that is suited to this grape—Vat 47 continues to defy that orthodoxy. Caillard believes that Chardonnay first arrived in Australia under the name Pineau Blanc or Morrillon and was made into wine as early as 1876. The earliest concrete example, contrary to what we have been led to believe, came in 1936, when Leo Buring exhibited a “novelty Australian Chardonnay” from 1893, in London.

In 1955, Chardonnay cuttings arrived in Western Australia from the University of Davis, California, thanks to Professor Harry Olmo and the friendships he developed when there. This was a clone given the romantic tag Foundation Plant Services 1 (occasionally shortened to FPS 1). Caillard quotes Brian Croser, a man crucial to the success of the variety in later years, noting that this clone was in the Armstrong Vineyard at

Left: A Petaluma vineyard in Adelaide Hills, the area that, for many, “established that Australia really could make first-class Chardonnay.”

Davis at the end of Prohibition. Croser believes that it came from well before Prohibition, given that planting vineyards was hardly a common activity at the time, believing it to have been first planted in the Livermore Valley in 1908.

In 1961, FPS 1 was withdrawn from distribution because of a tendency to succumb to hen and chicken (*millerandage*), but by then it was already in the West, where it would become legendary as the Gingin clone, still subject to the disease but also treasured by many Margaret River wineries for the quality it imbues in their wines. The name Gingin is believed to come from a small town of that name about 110 miles (70km) north of Perth. The Emu Wine Company planted there extensively in 1968 and later became the Moondah Brook Estate. Most of the vineyard was Chenin Blanc and the classic reds, but there was also some experimental Chardonnay, including this clone. Today, the town of Gingin is best known as part of an international research effort into gravitational waves.

Croser, who has detailed this history in his July 2018 treatise “The Story of Chardonnay,” noted that on his return to California, Olmo heat-treated FPS 1 and destroyed the original stocks. The heat-treated vines became the clone known as FPS 2A. In 1969, the scientists at Davis decided that FPS 2A was not free of the same virus, so it was also destroyed. The previous year, however, material was sent to South Australia, where it seems to have thrived, even if not disease-free, and Croser planted it in his famous Tiers Vineyard in 1979. Needless to say, as Caillard details, that would all be too easy. Genome sequencing in 2021 revealed that material in Tiers is likely related to vines from the Kaluna Vineyard, planted at Smithfield in New South Wales in the 1830s, meaning it derived from the famous James Busby vine importation of 1832. (Fascinating stuff, perhaps, but if we head any further down this rabbit hole, we’ll need this entire magazine for space.) One final note on clones: Testing reveals that Gingin, Mendoza from Argentina, and OF Chard from the US all share “a recent common progenitor.”

Tyrrell’s has, with some justification, always claimed to have released the first commercial Chardonnay in Australia: the 1971 Vat 47 Pinot Chardonnay. Being Tyrrell’s, there is

inevitably a fabulous backstory to it, though the name simply comes from the vat in which the wine was originally placed. Pinot Chardonnay was a common name given to the grape in the early days, and Tyrrell’s stuck with it until label integrity made that impossible. They did so because apparently a local, unnamed wine critic berated them in an article, telling them it was time to drop it. Apparently, Murray Tyrrell’s response was to tell the writer concerned that they would do so, the moment he dropped dead.

Caillard has further evidence that Tyrrell’s claims may have been somewhat premature, noting that in 1969 a Rosseto Beelgara Vineyards Pinot Chardonnay from Griffith in NSW, won a silver medal at the Adelaide Wine Show with an unoaked Chardonnay from that vintage.

Back in the 1960s, Murray Tyrrell—with friends Len Evans, Max Lake (a famous surgeon who established Australia’s first boutique winery, Lakes Folly, and also authored a number of highly regarded wine and food books), and Rudi Komon, a famous art dealer and wine judge at the time—often enjoyed great white Burgundies, and he was keen to give an Aussie version a crack. It was known that Penfolds had a small patch of Chardonnay in a local Hunter vineyard, the HVD Vineyard, but that was used for its Pinot/Riesling—given the lax labeling of the day, it comes as no surprise to discover that the Pinot/Riesling was in fact a Chardonnay/Semillon—seemingly sharing was out of the question. (It is difficult to believe that Murray could not simply have got on the phone to Max Schubert or any local Penfolds winemaker and asked for a few cuttings. Generosity among colleagues has always been an essential pillar of the local wine industry.) It is believed that the Chardonnay in the HVD Vineyard was planted in 1908, by a Catholic seminarian and a nun, both of whom had fled France to marry. The seminarian was the grandfather of the former head of the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) and federal government minister Greg Combet. HVD stands for Hunter Valley Distillery, since in those days the grapes were largely intended for distillation.

In 1983, the Tyrrell family purchased the vineyard. Murray also released a “Pinot/Riesling,” his Vat 63, in 1970, but again,



Above (left): Brian Croser, “a man crucial to the success” of Chardonnay in Australia; (right) Cobaw Ridge, “producing superb wines since the early ‘80s.”
Opposite: Key members of the current Tyrrell’s team: Mark Richardson (red-wine maker), Bruce Tyrrell, Chris Tyrrell, Andrew Spinaze (chief winemaker).



Over the years, the style pendulum has swung to offer everything from luscious to lean, fat and buttery to acidic, simple to complex, maximum or minimal intervention, the unoaked phenomenon, flavorsome, and everything in between

it was a blend of Chardonnay and Semillon. Both the 1971 and 1972 Vat 47s were unoaked, because they were made in the same manner as Semillon.

The midnight caper to relieve Penfolds of some of its Chardonnay took place in 1967. According to legend, Murray and some of his team grabbed their secateurs, hopped the fence, and took some cuttings for themselves. No one did marketing quite like Murray, so just how true is this tale? There are numerous versions. John Lewis, a writer from Newcastle, has claimed that the cuttings were already destined for the fire and that Murray told him that his actions “were honorably in order.” As mentioned, the idea that Murray had to steal the vines is something that has never sat well. Lewis is another who believed that Murray could have called Schubert at any time and simply asked. Of course, that lacks the same panache when it comes to a tale to sell the wine.

The early reception of Vat 47 was somewhat underwhelming. At the Brisbane Wine Show, the 1973 Vat 47 was awarded a dismal 6/20 by respected judge Bill Chambers. Bruce Tyrrell reckons Chambers would have given the

spittoon 8/20. Chambers later said that the “wine was either volatile and oxidized or the best wine I’ve ever seen”—and he was not going to risk a gold medal until he had worked out which. When the same wine won Champion Wine at the Adelaide Show and a further ten golds, perhaps Chambers’s dilemma was resolved.

A fly in the timing tale comes from Mudgee, the Craigmoor winery, where winemaker Pieter van Gent also released a 1971 Chardonnay. There are suggestions it was blended with Semillon, but van Gent has said he made a single hogshead and that was not enough to bottle commercially. There are also reports of examples being made in Rutherglen back in 1912.

So, there are numerous inconvenient facts about our inaugural Chardonnay. But whichever way one looks at this, there can be no doubt that Vat 47 was the wine that started Australia down the Chardonnay path. And once we were on that road, there was no looking back.

Myriad styles, stellar quality

Styles have varied widely over the years—from those easy-drinking “sunshine in a bottle” examples, to wines that were basically so mummified in wood that many consumers mistook the taste of oak for that of the grape. Over the years, the pendulum has swung to offer everything from luscious to lean, fat and buttery to acidic, and simple to complex, along with decadent examples (remember the old Rosemount Roxburgh), maximum or minimum intervention, the unoaked phenomenon (which surely laid a platform for the Kiwi Sauvalanche and that ridiculous ABC, “Anything but Chardonnay” phase), flavorsome, and everything in between. All the while, these wines were made and enjoyed in the

Photography courtesy of Tyrrell's

feature / **Ken Gargett** / Australian Chardonnay

reflection of the best from Burgundy. Every aspect of the oak, malo, lees, yeasts, alcohol, blend versus single-vineyard, clones, reduction or not and, if so, then at what level (the near-fanatical reverence held by many winemakers for the wines of Coche-Dury has certainly played an influential role), barrel-fermentation, climate, skin-contact, maturation vessels, winemaking spectra has been poked, prodded, twisted, and examined—and continues to be. In addition, aside from a few wines like Penfolds Yattarna, which is widely sourced, every conceivable terroir has been thoroughly explored. Indeed, it is almost impossible to think of an Australian wine region that

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has not planted Chardonnay, even though not all are suited. (Officially, 58 of Australia's 65 regions include Chardonnay.)

In recent years, Australia has produced Chardonnay that can comfortably sit with the very best in the world. Sure, there are oceans of quaffable and even bog-standard offerings that provide simple, easy, and largely forgettable drinking, but the best are surely examples of the world's most underrated wine styles. Not so long ago, at a lunch with blind wines, a superb

Below: Martin and Karen Spedding, owners of Ten Minutes by Tractor, "one of the wineries that should be on every wine lover's bucket list."



Bonneau du Martray sat next to a 1990s Giaconda; the Australian blew the French wine off the table. (A wide range of palates were in complete agreement on this.) Even more recently, at a similar lunch that included some serious Francophiles, I watched as one nearly wept, cradling an empty bottle of 2005 Leeuwin Estate Art Series, wondering why on Earth he'd ever wasted so much money on white Burgs. (I suspect the tears were at the thought of the money he could have saved, rather than an emotional connection to the wine.) These are hardly isolated occurrences, but of course there are also a great many examples that come nowhere near these soaring heights, simply providing good value and good drinking. In fairness to France, it would be a brave man who suggested that their greatest did not still reign supreme, though the premox issues endemic to Burgundy some years ago proved a boon to sales of our best locally.

Chardonnay is the fifth most planted variety on the planet (behind Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Tempranillo, and Airen), and Australia has around 10% of all Chardonnay vines, after France and the USA. Only Shiraz has more plantings in Australia, but in 2024 more Chardonnay was crushed than Shiraz. The first record of volume for Chardonnay crushed in Australia was in 1976—just 445 tons. (By comparison, Semillon was almost 25,000 tons that year.) By the end of the 1970s, the harvest finally hit 1,000 tons, creeping up to just under 40,000 tons in 1990, before peaking in 2008 at 428,000 tons. Chardonnay in 2024 saw a crush of 332,643 tons, almost one quarter of our entire crush. Some 21,442ha (52,935 acres) of Chardonnay are planted—16% of all vineyards. The vast majority of the crush is in regions providing the more commercial styles. Nearly one quarter (23.4%) of export volume is Chardonnay, though this drops to 13.5% when it comes to value. The USA takes 42% (though who knows where the tariff chaos will leave that?) and the UK 12%, followed by Canada, Japan, and Hong Kong.

At its best, Australian Chardonnay is now world-class and worthy of attention from anyone serious about wine. What follows is a look at some of our best. Needless to say, space (and the slackness of a couple of winemakers—you know who you are, Carlos) means that we can never offer complete coverage. This does not even address the use of Chardonnay in our sparkling wines. Chardonnay in this country has never been more exciting than it is today, and it is only getting better. How long before the wine world thinks Chardonnay when Australia is mentioned, rather than Shiraz?

Margaret River magic

Before looking at individual producers, it is worth addressing regional issues. While wines like Penfolds Yattarna are made from the best fruit from a wide range of options across the country, most of our best are from single sites or at least restricted to one region.

One region has, consistently, outperformed all others. The tiny district of Beechworth in Victoria created quite a splash, originally thanks to the extraordinary wines of Giaconda; and recently it has been well supported by a number of stellar producers. But it is Margaret River, one of the most isolated wine regions on the planet, in the far southwest of Western Australia, that must surely be not only our best but one of the most exciting Chardonnay regions in the world.

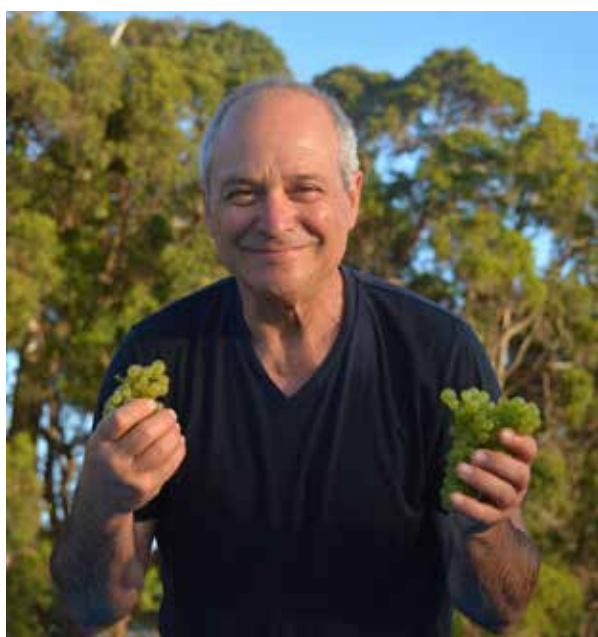


Above: The core team at Leeuwin Estate in Margaret River: Justin Horgan (co-CEO), Phil Hutchison (winemaker), Simone Furlong (co-CEO), Tim Lovett (senior winemaker), and David Winstanley (viticulturist). Below: Will Berliner of Clodburst, who is crafting some of Australia's "most exciting wines."

Australians are known for perhaps placing a greater reliance on wine shows than most countries—Len Evans always stressed how important they were to “improve the breed.” Not every top wine is entered, of course, but the results

speak for themselves. If we look at the Capital City shows, considered the most important, over the past decade, we can see that Margaret River has won 41 Best Chardonnay trophies out of a possible 63. In 2023, Margaret River won six out of a possible seven trophies, and picked up five out of a possible seven trophies in five other years. This is even more impressive when one considers that in three of the other years, not all the shows were held, due to Covid. It is astonishing to think that the Margaret River region produces only 1% of all the Chardonnay grown in Australia, and yet its wines won 65% of the trophies for best Chardonnay. Why? Margaret River enjoys a maritime climate—hardly Burgundian. It is low-altitude and certainly not a particularly cool region. No doubt, the oceanic influence plays a role, and the Gingin clone has found its ideal home. The winemakers are highly talented and driven, but that can be said of many regions. It just works! As an aside, the region's success rate for Best Cabernet trophies is even higher. (Tasmania has an equally successful history, with trophies for Pinot Noir and sparkling wines.)

Most of the notes that follow are based on wines submitted for this article, with a few from random tastings. The choice was up to each winery concerned, but the hope was that they would include something young and something more mature. Needless to say, many of the older wines may no longer be available. If the scores seem optimistically elevated, I can only plead that they are for our very best Chardonnays. For me, the scores reflect that. ■



Photography courtesy of (top) Leeuwin Estate; (bottom) Clodburst

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YARRA VALLEY

The Yarra Valley is responsible for many of the country's finest Chardonnays, and its variations in soil and microclimates, as well as winemaking approaches, ensure considerable diversity. The best wines are textured, focused, intense, and yet elegant, with longevity key. Stone-fruit notes, especially of peaches, are not uncommon.

GIANT STEPS

Established by Phil Sexton and under the steady but talented stewardship of Steve Flamsteed and, now, Melanie Chester, Giant Steps focuses on single-vineyard wines, with the Sexton Vineyard considered its pinnacle of Chardonnay.

Winemaking has traditionally seen whole-bunch pressing into puncheons for natural fermentation. The fruit/juice is handled oxidatively at that stage with no SO₂, but after fermentation Giant Steps treats the wine “very reductively, with no stirring.” Changes over the past two decades “include full solids fermentation, larger-format oak vessels, fermenting in vessels other than oak (ceramic and concrete), more reductive handling of finished wine and super-oxidative handling of juice, and embracing the wild fermentation with all the trials and tribulations that brings.”

In the vineyard, they have moved to increase the space between rows rather than adopting close planting, while carefully addressing soil health and under-vine and mid-row management. All Chardonnays are fermented in French oak puncheons, 15% new. They look to Mercurey, Taransaud, and Dargaud & Jaiglé but have evolved to focus more and more on the “savory toastiness of the Mercurey oak.” Among the questions posed to winemakers was their preference of closure—cork or screwcap. The response here was pretty much universal across the industry: “Screwcap, no questions.”

Sexton Vineyard Chardonnay 2023

Near-transparent lemon, the wine has serious concentration, with notes of nectarines, orange rind, spices, honeysuckle, and bergamot. Full of life, with good length and balance; there is impressive and alluring elegance throughout. Enjoy for the next six to eight years. | 95

Sexton Vineyard Chardonnay 2021

Grapefruit and lemon abound here on the nose, along with notes of mandarins, matchsticks, hazelnuts, macadamia, gunflint, grapefruit, and a flick of beeswax. Citrus notes linger appealingly along, with a line of fresh acidity. There is early complexity evident, and we can expect much from this wine in the coming years. Eight to ten years. | 94

LEVANTINE HILL

One of the more impressive wineries on the Mornington Peninsula, Levantine Hill is a place where you know they will leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of excellence. Highly respected and experienced winemaker Paul Bridgeman was brought in to ensure this. When it comes to Chardonnay, the aim here is “for a more elegant middle ground, where body, flavor, and palate weight can coexist, still with great length and complexity on the palate, and alongside an inherent food-friendliness.” The “ultra-premium” Katherine's Paddock Chardonnay is named for the founders' daughter.

The estate operates with a range of clones, including 110V5, P58, Mendoza, Bernard 96, and Bernard 95. Fermentation and maturation are in French oak, a range of different formats and from different cooperages. Maturation is normally for 9–11 months, and a proportion of the oak will be new.

Katherine's Paddock Chardonnay 2019

Even with a few years under its belt, this thrilling Chardonnay from some of the highest vineyards in the Yarra is still fresh, clean, and bright. The balance is exemplary and the wine focused, combining power with elegance. There is an array of aromas, with citrusy notes to the fore, most notably lemon and grapefruit, along with ginger, floral, and stone-fruit notes. A seductive texture, with hints of oatmeal; the oak integration is immaculate, and the wine has at least a decade of providing pleasure in front of it. A pristine Chardonnay of complexity and refinement, this shines a light on just how good wines from the Yarra Valley can be. | 97

YARRA YERING

After many years with Brokenwood in the Hunter Valley, Sarah Crowe landed in one of the hot seats of Australian winemaking. She is now chief winemaker at the famous Yarra Yering winery, established by Bailey Carrodus, and in most minds she has managed to raise the wines to hitherto unattained levels. The first vintage of Chardonnay released at the estate was the 1981; prior to that, the fruit from the young vines was blended with Semillon.

Sarah's view of Australian Chardonnay is that it “should taste of the place where it was grown. There is a real respect for the fruit, and the concept of terroir and sense of place are paramount—winemaking should play a supporting role and take a backseat. They are elegant yet detailed wines, ethereal and mouthwatering. You want more of it but don't know why.” This is what makes her Chardonnay unique. It simply cannot be made anywhere else. Sarah notes that they get the “Yarra Valley pillowy fruit, wonderfully gentle yet refreshing. Being a warmer site, we get decent ripeness, so I try to sit on the fence between stone fruits and citrus, playing with both profiles on the palate.”

The basis of Sarah's wines comes from the original 1969 plantings, which were supplemented in 2012. One change she has made is that malolactic fermentation is now a “winemaking choice based on seasonal factors rather than a stylistic choice.” This came about because, in the past, the wines were not filtered. Malolactic fermentation was employed in an effort to stabilize the wines. She has introduced filtration, giving her the option. She has also moved from basket presses to airbags. The use of oak is now more restrained, with a lighter toast.

Chardonnay 2023

This is from the vineyard planted in 1969. The color is still a crystalline lemon. Fresh, focused, pristine, and poised, this is an exquisitely well-balanced Chardonnay, exuding endless elegance and with such a lingering finish. Peaches, lemon curd, florals, and the merest hint of oak all mingle effortlessly and stay with you for ages. Yet surely its best is still to come. Ten to 12 years. A stunning Chardonnay. | 96

Chardonnay 2015

With a decade under its belt already, this wine surely has at least another decade ahead of it. The nose reveals notes of nectarines, lemongrass, jasmine, white peaches, glacé ginger, florals, and spices. Finely crafted, with superb balance and impressive length; and there is a creamy texture that never wavers. | 95

MORNINGTON PENINSULA

Proximity to the ocean inevitably plays a key role in the wines of Mornington Peninsula, not just Chardonnay. The region enjoys high natural acidity, and the cooler nature provides for pristine styles, exhibiting elegance and pure fruit. Citrus, stone fruits, and melons are all evident here.

MAIN RIDGE

When Nat and Rosalie White established the Main Ridge winery in 1975, it was one of the very earliest in the region's resurgence. Time finally caught up with the Whites, and this winery, perhaps the most renowned in the entire Mornington Peninsula region, was sold to the Sexton family. Needless to say, there were considerable concerns as to whether the high quality of the wines would be maintained. It seems that any such concerns were unfounded.

The fruit for the estate Chardonnay comes from the Home Block, which is now believed to be the P58 clone, planted in 1975. In the '90s, attempts to make Cabernet were finally shelved, the results unacceptable, and the vines were grafted over to 110V5 Chardonnay. They have approximately 3ha (7.5 acres) of Chardonnay vines. The grapes are handpicked, destemmed, and lightly crushed before spending four to eight hours on skins. After gentle pressing and two days' settling, the juice goes into French barriques (Sirugue, 30% new) for fermentation. Full malolactic fermentation follows. The wine remains on lees for one year, during which time it will be stirred on two or three occasions. Bottling takes place without filtration. Several trellising systems have been employed in the vineyard, but “as the vines enter their senior years and vigor has declined,” a conversion to VSP has taken place.

The team now sees the wines sitting somewhere between “old school and new wave.” They look to build richness in the wines and for ripe aromas,

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particularly peaches and melons, where possible. Complexity comes through wild fermentation, extended lees contact, and the use of oak. Closure? “Screwcap, and no turning back.” They have used screwcaps here since 2002 and believe that, under it, their Chardonnay can age gracefully for 20 years. Their experience has been that, under cork, the fruit is dulled after five to ten years. Production, in a good year, will be around 300 to 400 dozen.

Chardonnay 2023

This is something very special—a Chardonnay that is all class. A deep lemon hue, then there is refinement throughout. On the nose, we have lemons, stone fruits, peaches, gunflint, ginger, and other spices, with a line of citrusy acidity. Coiled power sits below an intensity that never wavers. Energetic, balanced, and with amazing length, this will live and improve for at least a decade. Sadly, only 100 dozen bottles made. | 98

Chardonnay 2019

A deeper yellow hue here, and the nose gives a range of delightful aromatics, with apricot skins, hints of lemon curd, stone fruits, lemongrass, and cashews. The texture is utterly sensual and seductive, and the wine has great length. The intensity is maintained for the full, seamless journey. It will impress for the next six to eight years. | 97

ELANTO

Sandro Mosele is one of those winemakers who seemingly everyone knows. He has been a respected figure in Mornington Peninsula for many years. Elanto is his latest project, and the 2023 is the first wine from it.

They have three blocks of Chardonnay—Verge, Buckshot, and Seawinds—totaling around 4ha (10 acres), which should provide around 2,000 bottles annually. They operate with high-density planting. Sandro’s experience with Chardonnay in Mornington Peninsula meant that, when it came to choosing a white variety, there was no other option. Each of the blocks is harvested discreetly and vinified individually. The juice goes into a mix of new and older French oak barriques for a natural fermentation. The wine then spends ten months in barrel before it is blended in large concrete vats and given another couple of months’ rest before bottling. Sandro has gone with Diam closures, not least because he wanted a point of difference and likes the wax seal.

Balnarring Chardonnay 2023

Sourced from a high-density vineyard, the wine is still exhibiting an attractive layer of oak, but integration is proceeding well. There are notes of spices and figs, with nectarines, florals and stone fruits. The palate exhibits hints of oatmeal. Good focus and energy, and a lingering finish. Enjoy this over the next five years. | 94

TEN MINUTES BY TRACTOR

This is one of the wineries that should be on every wine lover’s bucket list. Not only does it make superb wines, but put simply, it does everything well. And the cherry on top is an absolutely brilliant restaurant with a world-class wine list. When I mentioned writing about Chardonnay to owner Martin Spedding, his excitement and enthusiasm knew no bounds. “Is there another variety being produced in Australia that, across the board, is better in terms of both quality and consistency than Australian Chardonnay? And has it ever been better?” The focus at Ten Minutes by Tractor has very much been on single-vineyard wines, and it has recently added a new flagship to the range, the Trahere Chardonnay, made from high-density vineyards.

The McCutcheon, Judd, and Wallis single-vineyard wines are produced from the three original vineyards, which are, no surprise, all ten minutes by tractor apart. They were planted in the early 1990s, all with the same clone, P58, and used the same trellising (Scott Henry). Since 1999, the vineyards have been managed in the same manner. Martin’s excitement at having these three sites is something that he simply cannot contain. He notes the subtle differences in “aspect, elevation, and the cool winds that flow from the Western Port, Port Phillip, and the Southern Ocean,” and that the “intrigue and magic of these wines has only grown over the years. As we get closer to them, the clarity of their personality and terroir grows deeper, and we fall deeper into the rabbit hole. And it is Chardonnay that takes you there.” If that does not make you

want to reach for a bottle, I have no idea what will. He notes the differences: “McCutcheon has a stone-fruit lift, is mouth-filling, richer, and layered with nectarine and white peach. Wallis has an enticing white-blossom lift and a beautiful, linear acid drive that provides incredible focus and persistence. And Judd, which has a distinct saline, sea-spray, oyster-shell type mineral drive, is very textural and has high energy.”

There has been tinkering over the years. The proportion of new oak has been reduced, larger-format barrels have been included, and the team picks a little earlier to take advantage of the Mornington Peninsula acidity. They see the major changes over recent decades as having taken place in the vineyards. Under-vine mowing, the use of cover crops, composting, and planting native flowers and shrubs to enhance biodiversity, and employing sheep in winter months to assist with weed control and pest management have all helped improve the wines. Between 2011 and 2020, much of the Chardonnay was either grafted or replanted to Dijon clones, clone 95 in particular. They have also moved to much higher-density vineyards. It is these vineyards that have provided the fruit for the Trahere releases. Density is 12,400 vines per hectare—many times the standard.

McCutcheon Chardonnay 2021

A classic Mornington Peninsula Chardonnay from an excellent vintage. The nose weaves its way through notes of beeswax, apricots, peaches, spices, mandarins, and even a touch of honey. Really good concentration and serious underlying power here. The structure is supple and seamless, the texture creamy, and the length impressive. Eight years. | 95

McCutcheon Chardonnay 2015

Anyone concerned as to the longevity of top-notch Australian Chardonnay should add this to their drinking list. A mature, complex, and intriguing style, with notes of dry herbs, hazelnuts, spices, orange rind, and glacé ginger. Give it time in the glass to open up, and it will reward. There are also hints of a briny, chalky backing and attractive melon notes emerging on the palate, along with touches of bitter almond. It still has several years of providing pleasure ahead of it. | 95

Trahere Chardonnay 2021

A limited-edition release that is still oozing the promise to come, this is fresh and youthful, with hints of lemon sponge cake, grapefruit, citrus, dried herbs, and a touch a deft oak handling. Excellent length and focus. The wine has balance and a line of bright, zesty acidity. This has much more to give over the next decade. | 96.

BEECHWORTH

As a region, Beechworth is a mere 130ha (320 acres), smaller than the appellation of Condrieu. A cool region, the geology varies, of course, but granite and quartz are important here. Chardonnay—intense and textured—is not the only variety performing magic, but the success of Giaconda has put the focus firmly on it. It is a region of overperforming producers.

GIACONDA

Rick Kinzbrunner has been compared to Don Bradman. In Australian-speak, there can be no higher accolade. Sir Donald is the greatest cricketer who ever lived—in indeed, for many, the greatest sportsman, though that is the sort of statement that leads to very late nights and many empty bottles. He transformed the game through his skill. Quite whether Rick sits at that level is another of those topics for lengthy debate, but it is fair to say he raised Australian Chardonnay to new levels and still today is seen as its greatest practitioner. (Brian Croser also deserves at least a look-in here.)

I first met Rick many years ago, when he was doing a short stint with a now-defunct Rutherglen producer before establishing Giaconda. I have been buying Rick’s wines (which I guess is pretty much as big a compliment as I can pay them)—not just the incomparable Chardonnay—since back in the past century, and every single bottle has proved just as thrilling as the last. Rick’s experience does extend past a small local producer in a mostly fortified region. He also spent time at Stag’s Leap and Petrus, as well as Brown Brothers in Victoria. Since 2007, Rick’s son Nathan has worked with him.

Rick describes finding the site for his vineyard in the then-almost-unknown region of Beechworth as luck, but one suspects there was a little more to it. He has described how he fell in love with Beechworth at first sight—a tiny town once home to gold miners and bushrangers. He also had his eye on a clone that Penfolds had brought in from Le Montrachet, P58, but that had not really caught on in the way it eventually would. Rick liked the clone for its low yields and fruit intensity. As he says, “Right from the start, I always had a passion for Chardonnay, though there was very little of it in Australia at that time. When I tasted my first French Chardonnay (Chablis), I was hooked.” He did try Burgundian clones, with little success, but he does have a little Mendoza.

Rick’s vines are now more than 40 years old, planted back in 1982 (the operation opened in 1985), and his method of winemaking has changed very little. Excavation of his cellar required two and a half tons of dynamite—it sits at 61–63°F (16–17°C) all year round, with humidity at 90%. When he first planted, the split in the vineyard was 60% Cabernet and 40% Chardonnay. Needless to say, Beechworth Cabernet does not hold quite the same aura to which it once aspired. Right from the start, he made the wine he wanted to drink and, fortunately for the rest of us, “never fell for the current fashionista styles.” Grapes are harvested when fully ripe, though he notes that, on average, perhaps not quite as ripe as in the past, since he likes to avoid the possibility of overripeness. He has replanted some Chardonnay to cooler parts of his site, thanks to the impact of climate change, and is always on the lookout for minor vineyard tweaks. The vineyard is run on “strict organic principles,” and the wine is made “in a super-traditional method, only basket-pressed, a quick settling, then fermented with natural yeasts (small amounts of inoculated yeasts sometimes used) and fermented underground in 225-liter barrels, 30% new. Maturation time has been reduced from 20 months to 12. Malolactic is always natural and 100%.” His oak regime has changed very little. The wine is not pumped at any stage, except as juice out of the press. As well as making his wines, Rick also operates as the sole importer for the Sirugue French oak cooperage for both Australia and New Zealand. At Giaconda, they use a mix of Tronçais and Vosges, which are given three years’ air-drying and then a range of toasting.

Back in 2003, Rick split the bottling between cork and screwcaps. I remember this well, because friends who had not been able to get their allocation under screwcap, which quickly sold out, were reluctant to buy under cork. Whichever you prefer, this seemed odd, since they’d been buying under cork for years. By 2013, the market had spoken, and the use of cork was terminated. They have not seen any issues selling the wine, even in prestige markets, but given the international recognition and admiration for the Giaconda Chardonnay, that is hardly surprising. These wines are Australian, but they do offer a wary nod to the best from Burgundy.

Rick is not easing into retirement, and his standards seem higher than ever. Many feel that the 2022 Chardonnay was his greatest wine yet (Rick would opt for the 2023, I believe), though given that he has racked up almost as many scores of 100 as the great Bradman, it becomes hard to pick a winner. If the divinities and the tax office decide I can only buy one wine a year, it will be Giaconda Chardonnay.

Chardonnay 2011

2011 was generally considered the weakest vintage across Australia in many years. Clearly, no one told Beechworth. A gleaming, deep-gold hue. This has gorgeous aromatics of oatmeal, figs, and stone fruits, notably peaches. There are hints of Tahitian lime and a lovely saline minerality in support. Wonderfully complex, this is balanced and intense, with a fine line of acidity. The creamy texture is wonderfully alluring, and there is great length. This still has at least eight years ahead of it. | 97

Chardonnay 2017

Pale lemon in color, this is a rich, full-flavored, wonderfully decadent style of Chardonnay, with great intensity. Gunflint notes, with minerals, stone fruits, apricot skins, and figs. The oak here was less apparent than with the 2019, tasted at the same time. Integration has preceded precisely as I imagine the winemakers would wish. There is a flick of nutmeg, nougat, and the merest hint of caramel toffee. Great intensity on the palate and such length; this walks the tightrope between power and refinement. Not hard to believe it will still be drinking beautifully in 20 years. | 99

Chardonnay 2018

There are several exceptional Australian Chardonnays, but if I am asked to show someone what I believe to be the best of the best, it is to Giaconda I will always turn. It has been my go-to option for great local Chardonnay for three decades, and this is one of the very best. With considerable age already under its belt, this wine shows just why so many people revere this Chardonnay. The color was still a bright, fresh, pale lemon, with flecks of green. On the nose, we have notes of hazelnuts and cashews, lemon sponge cake, peach pits, stone fruits, gunflint, and oatmeal. A wine of immaculate balance, great intensity, serious concentration, and a long and lingering finish. Layered and complex, this still has 15 years ahead of it. World-class. | 98

Chardonnay 2019

One from the portfolio that seems to be taking a little longer to completely come together than is usual—not that this is a problem. A pale lime/lemon in color, its youth is there for all to see. Taut, poised, and concentrated, with good focus; there are oak notes evident as integration proceeds. The nose reveals aromas of cashews, oatmeal, white peaches, nutmeg, cinnamon, lemon curd, and Key lime pie. Coiled power here, with a line of fine acidity; this is still amazingly youthful. A long and lingering finish. The wine is seamless. It is a masterpiece of force and finesse and should remain so for at least 20 years. | 98

Chardonnay 2021

Tragically, Australian bushfires destroyed any possibility of the release of a 2020 vintage. Rick and his team more than made up for it with what is the first of a trio of some of the finest wines ever made in Australia. This is simply spectacular. Complex, with great length and intensity running the full length, and the most alluring and seductive texture. There are notes of hazelnut, freshly sliced limes, and stone fruit, with nectarines, oysterhells, white jasmine, and beautifully handled oak. The balance is extraordinary, and this is surely a wine that will provide pleasure for at least the next two decades. Served blind to a couple of Burgundy addicts, they picked it as a great vintage of a Blain-Gagnard grand cru. | 100

Chardonnay 2022

At the time it was released, this extraordinary Chardonnay was largely considered the best Rick had released, along with the 1996, if memory serves. And perhaps 2018? It was, as they say in the classics, a tour de force. Pale yet shining lemon in color, it gives the impression that it is perhaps still just a little closed. Certainly tight and focused, but the structure is seamless. There is truly exquisite balance throughout, with underlying power. The nose reveals notes of figs, oatmeal, white peaches, florals, minerals, gunflint, and lemon curd. The oak is supremely well integrated, and there is a line of fine acidity running the length. The wine seems to linger forever. On the palate, it seems hints of tropical notes like pineapple are just sticking their nose above the parapet. Sheer class. I assure you that I prefer not to hand out scores of this magnitude with what might seem the flippancy with which they occur. I do look very hard for reasons to knock back a few points whenever possible. I just couldn’t find any. | 100

Chardonnay 2023

Probably all you need to know is that I understand that Rick considers this his favorite of all the Chardonnays he has made. He talks of it combining the power of the 2021 vintage with the “fruit and matchstick of 2022,” but more subtle than either. For him, this is synchronicity in a glass. Tight and concentrated, with power, line, and length; the balance is perfect, and the texture wonderfully seductive. Even at this early stage, the complexity is obvious, and we can expect more to come. Flavors revolve through stone fruits, florals, figs, gunflint, matchsticks, oatmeal, lemon curd, and herbs. Early days, but the oak has been handled so deftly that what is there seems just one more part of the whole. Definitely a wine where the sum of the parts exceeds the individual components. Twenty years? Thirty, if you really wanted to try, I suspect. | 100

TASTING**SAVATERRE**

Anyone planting a vineyard in the Beechworth region will inevitably find themselves in the shadow of Giaconda, but Keppell Smith at Savaterre has persisted and established his own reputation for excellence—deservedly so. The vineyard is at the foothills of the Victorian Alps. Closely planted at 9,400 vines per hectare, as Keppell says, means less than a bottle from each vine.

Savaterre is another winery importing its own oak, in this case Cavin Burgundian barriques, mainly from the Chatillonnais forest. They ensure a light toasting only. When asked about their process, Keppell says it is “just old-school winemaking. No rush at any stage.” Why Chardonnay? “Because it’s the king of white grapes [...] and it performs exceptionally in Beechworth on our ancient soils.” Keppell describes himself as a Burgundy tragic, so this was a natural direction in which to proceed. Keppell also loves the 2022 vintage, calling it a “Goldilocks vintage” and a benchmark for Beechworth, believing his 2022 Chardonnay is the best he has ever made.

Chardonnay 2022

Although this wine had seen 18 months in French oak, the intensity of the fruit had completely absorbed it. We have notes of flint, river stones, wet steel, citrus, ginger, glacé lemon, hazelnuts, and grapefruit. A wine of serious focus and length; there is a seductive texture with fine balance. Love it. Eight to ten years. | 96

GEELONG

Once a thriving region for vineyards, Geelong was brought to a crashing halt around 140 years ago due to a combination of economic reasons, changing tastes, and phylloxera. It kicked off again in the late 1960s/early 1970s, with much of its success riding on the back of the efforts of Gary Farr, chief winemaker at Bannockburn from 1978 to 2004. Gary moved on in 2004 to establish his own operation, By Farr, now run by his son Nick. There are quality producers in the region, but it is the Farr family that has driven the wines to the heights they have achieved. Both Gary and Nick have spent considerable time in Burgundy, working at the famous Domaine Dujac, and the influence does not go unnoticed. The best of the region are wines of power and complexity.

BY FARR

One of the traits of the wines crafted by Gary Farr, and subsequently his son Nick, is that they are always evolving, always improving. Talking to Nick, his latest focus was improving rootstocks due to inconsistencies over the seasons. He is aiming to keep minerality and freshness in his wines. There is also a focus on clones. Originally, there was P58; now the focus has shifted to Dijon clones, but always in a way that they can keep experimenting and keep learning. Vine density is another project. Nick talks of looking for as much tension as possible to sustain the power in the wines. They have a true minerality that Nick believes comes from the limestone. His wines have a “salty character that draws you back.” Nick likes working with Chardonnay because he believes it shows regionality. He loves the purity of the fruit and how it is expressive of individual sites. Any oak use needs to be seamless and very much in the background. He believes Chardonnay ages better than Pinot Noir, especially in tough years. Retaining acidity is the key. They have a range of Chardonnays with their GC the flagship. How long for remains to be seen. GC stands for Gary Charles, as in Gary Charles Farr, and not grand cru, though either works. These are some of the finest Chardonnays made anywhere in Australia, and if one thing is certain, it is that we will see even better in the years to come.

GC Chardonnay 2023

As noted, GC stands for Gary Charles. This wine is under Diam. Shimmering straw/gold. There are wonderful aromatics, with notes of white peaches, ginger, lemongrass, immaculate oak integration, nectarines, and spices. This is a wine of complexity and intensity, with fine citrusy acidity running the full, seemingly endless length. Stunning stuff that has at least 15 years ahead of it. One suspects Gary would love it. | 96

Chardonnay Cote Vineyard 2017

A shining golden color, this is a wonderful Chardonnay with maturity and complexity and yet all the freshness and energy one could wish for. There are

notes of cashews, oatmeal, spices, ginger, mandarins, and apricots. The oak integration has long finished, and it has left the wine with such a seductive and creamy texture. Great length here, and the wine still has the best part of a decade ahead of it. Under Diam. | 97

MACEDON

Anyone keen to undertake cool-climate viticulture on the mainland of Australia need look no farther. The cool, elevated region of Macedon in Victoria is ideal for growing quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Bindi tends to be seen as a little bit of an outlier here, but you would be hard-pressed to find anyone who did not see its wines as the pick of the region—and some of the best made in the country. There are others who have established stellar reputations and for whom the future also looks very exciting.

BINDI

Planted in 1988 by Michael Dhillon’s father, Bill, Bindi places an emphasis on great Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Bill was born in India in 1937, spent time in Malaya, and moved to Victoria in the late ’50s. He was introduced to wine while studying, and the rest, as they say in the classics, is history. *Bindi* is a Punjabi word meaning “wisdom and humility” (and not, as most Aussies assume, a reference to the hated bindi weeds with their nasty little thorns, the bane of every young Aussie kid playing outdoors). The Bindi vineyards are at an elevation of 1,650ft (500m) above sea level—high for Australia. The soils are predominantly shattered quartz over siltstone, sandstone, and clay, with some eroded volcanic topsoil over clay. Bindi’s earliest vintages saw three barrels of 1991 Chardonnay made at Hanging Rock and two barrels of 1992 Pinot Noir at Mt Gisborne by Stuart Anderson of Balgownie, who would become a valued mentor to Michael. Since 1997, all Bindi wines have been made at the winery. Before taking over, Michael worked in Champagne, the Rhône, and Tuscany, as well as at Howard Park in Margaret River.

Michael is very much enamored of close planting in his vineyards, but what is perhaps more apparent is his deft touch with oak. It runs through all the wines. The clones he uses are P58 and I10. He sees all his vineyards as having their own personalities, and differences simply come down to conditions of the season. Michael has always stressed that “season cannot trump site.”

The Quartz Vineyard is a 480-million-year-old base of Ordovician soil, with quartz, mudstone, sandstone, clay, and a little 5-million-year-old volcanic soil intermixed. It was planted in 1988 and sits 1,650ft (500m) above sea level. Michael notes that every 330ft (100m) above sea level delays ripening by a week. The grapes are destemmed and given some skin contact in the press, then go straight to barrel with wild yeasts for 11 months’ maturation after fermentation. The oak is 228-liter barriques.

Quartz Chardonnay 2023

From a vineyard planted in 1988, Michael Dhillon has made some of Australia’s finest Chardonnays. This is no exception. There are pungent aromatics here, with notes of stone fruit, nectarines, grapefruits, spices, citrus, and an intriguing flick of white pepper. There is tight oak beautifully rendered, in a wine of poise and precision. Toward the finish, we see crisp nashi pear notes emerging. A line of bright acidity runs the full journey. Ten to 15 years ahead. Such promise. | 98

Quartz Chardonnay 2012

A mature Chardonnay but still with much to give. The nose has notes of ripe peaches, orange rind, glacé ginger, florals, and a slight chalky, mineral backing. A wine of incredible intensity, layered and with laser-like focus. On the palate, we see hints of figs and a touch of matchstick emerge. | 97

DASH FARMS (JOSH COOPER)

I first met Josh Cooper when he was working, or at least living, at his parent’s winery, Cobaw Ridge, many years ago. Clearly, as they say, the apple does not fall far from the tree, and Josh has established his own reputation as not only one of the region’s emerging talents but one of the best young winemakers in the country. His site, Dash Farms, sits on granitic slopes 1,500ft (450m) above sea level, technically just outside the Macedon Ranges GI. Josh believes that the lean granite soils and high altitude give his wines both concentration and freshness. Bunches are partially crushed by foot, as well as gently pressed before overnight settling and transfer to very lightly toasted 300-liter oak

From the Quartz vineyard planted in 1988 by his father, Michael Dhillon has made some of Australia's finest Chardonnays. This 2023 Bindi Quartz is no exception. There is tight oak beautifully rendered, in a wine of poise and precision. Such promise

vessels, around 10–15% new. Maturing after fermentation is for a year, followed by four months in stainless steel prior to bottling. His experience working in both Burgundy and Chablis assists him in building complexity in the wines. He believes full malolactic fermentation is important to the texture.

Fans of Josh's wines will be delighted to know that his next project for Chardonnay is an estate in the Macedon Ranges, where the vines will be close-planted at 10,000 vines per hectare.

Chardonnay 2023

Josh Cooper has emerged as a serious talent in the world of Chardonnay, and the evidence is plain for all to see. Here we have hints of apricot skins and peach pits, with a touch of nutmeg and cinnamon. Florals, figs, lemongrass, and notes of mandarin are in support, and the oak is beautifully melded. A seductively lingering finish. This is a joy to drink now but will still offer pleasure over the next 8–12 years. Under Diam. | 95

Chardonnay 2021

A plush and generous style, with hints of the development to date, but there is still a very long way for this wine to go. The nose gives notes of white peaches, florals, mango, honeysuckle, and some cushiony, cashew oak, with a hint of crumbly biscuits on the finish. The palate sees the emergence blood orange and pink grapefruit characters. Impressive length and fine balance, this is for enjoying any time over the next eight to ten years. | 96

COBAW RIDGE

The inclusion of this estate, owned and run by Josh Cooper's parents Alan and Nelly, is not just to ensure family harmony but to highlight some of the pioneers of the region who have been producing superb wines since the early 1980s. In 1985, 1.6ha (4 acres) of red-wine grapes were planted; 1.2ha (3 acres) of Chardonnay—the P58 clone—followed the next year. They have always operated in a largely organic manner and were certified in 2009, with biodynamic certification following in 2011. They moved from cork to Diam in 2003 and transitioned to Diam 30 in 2014, finding it made a huge difference to the aging potential of their wines. Time on lees without *bâtonnage* and time in tank prior to bottling have also been introduced. They have also moved to a more subtle oak-integration program, including some larger-format oak with lower toast levels. They recently planted a further 0.3ha (0.75 acre) at 7,000 vines per hectare and take every opportunity to experiment when they can, including a multi-vintage release from pressings.

Chardonnay 2023

The nose exhibits an array of enticing aromatics, including grapefruit, honeysuckle, a range of spices, oatmeal, and mandarin. There is a mineraly backing here, with a line of citrusy acidity. Impressive balance and length throughout; this is no shrinking violet, with flavor very much to the fore. Will drink well into the next decade. Under Diam. | 93

HUNTER VALLEY

If Margaret River's success with Chardonnay can raise an eyebrow, Tyrrell's extraordinary achievements with its Vat 47 are mind-blowing. If ever a wine seemingly shouldn't work... The region offers rich and ripe flavors, including stone fruits, cashews, and peaches. Again, surely Chardonnay from the region should not age in the way Tyrrell's has managed. Simply put your

preconceptions aside, and enjoy the wines. If you ever want to irritate a wine snob, serve them a bottle of Vat 47. After contempt and dismissal, there will be grudging respect and finally undoubted enjoyment. Not that they'd ever admit it.

TYRRELL'S

The focus is always on its extraordinary Vat 47, but Tyrrell's also offers a second prestige Chardonnay, HVD Old Vines. Yes, that stands for Hunter Valley Distillery, because that was where the fruit was originally intended to go. As noted, the 1971 Vat 47 was the genesis of Chardonnay in Australia. Who could have predicted where that wine would lead us? Tyrrell's purchased the HVD Vineyard, the source of the allegedly stolen vines, from Penfolds in the early '80s. The block of old vines in that vineyard, 0.82ha (2 acres), dates back to 1908. Tyrrell's believes there is an argument that this makes it the oldest producing Chardonnay vineyard in the world. It and the Short Flat Vineyard have been the backbone of Vat 47 for many years, but with the establishment of the HVD as a separate wine, Vat 47 now comes solely from the Short Flat Vineyard.

Vat 47 is matured in French oak barriques, from the Burgundian coöperage François Frères. Malolactic fermentation is avoided, and the wine remains on gross lees until September each year, before racking. It has been under screwcap since 2004. Chris Tyrrell is, understandably, delighted at the results they get with Vat 47. "I think Chardonnay should be generous but still have freshness and vibrance of acidity, and I think that's something we've got a good handle on now." One suspects the Vat 47 will be around for as long as Australia is making Chardonnay.

Vat 47 Chardonnay 2023

The wine that, for many people, started it all. The color is a very pale, almost watery lemon hue, but there is no lack of punch when it comes to the aromas and palate. A wine of precision and focus, with notes of limes and lemons; the intensity never wavers. Pink-grapefruit touches emerge on the finish, along with florals and stone fruits. This will drink beautifully for at least the next 10–12 years. | 95

Vat 47 Chardonnay 2017

This is from an excellent vintage for the Hunter Valley. The nose offers lemon sherbert, citrus, florals, lemongrass, sea-breeze notes, and hints of grapefruit. Citrusy acidity runs the full length. A most persistent style, with excellent focus, but complexity is already evident, too, and it should build even further over the next decade. | 96

TASMANIA

A region that basically encompasses an entire state of Australia, even if it is our smallest, will offer an infinite variety of microclimates and terroirs. The broadest brush would suggest that this is where we find our coolest vineyards. The use of so much of the Island's Chardonnay for its superb sparklers is an indication of the style grown.

DAWSON JAMES

No doubt many wine lovers haven't a clue about the two gentlemen behind this label. In short, Peter Dawson and Tim James are two of the finest winemakers Australia has ever seen, working together at Hardys for decades. (Big companies rarely do rock-star winemakers, so most consumers have no clue who is behind the wines.) They have more than 80 vintages between them, and if you've drunk Australian wine, you have almost certainly drunk wines made by one or both of the team. As their time at Hardys came to an end, neither was ready to hang up their boots, so they created this small passion project. The wines should be on every wine lover's bucket list.

Dawson and James were keen to offer pure and pristine expressions of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from a cool climate. The fruit is sourced from the Meadowbank Vineyard in the Upper Derwent Valley, planted back in the 1980s. The guys knew of it because it had provided Hardys with grapes for premium sparkling wines for many years. The clones they use include 110V5 and P58. The fruit is whole-bunch-pressed and fermented in French oak barriques. The Chardonnay then sits on yeast lees for eight months, with regular stirring. They use 228-liter French oak barrels, around one third new, sourced from Taransaud's Burgundy coöperage.

TASTING

Chardonnay 2021

The immediate impression is one of ultra-elegance. Understated, refined, almost ethereal; there are hints of citrus, river stones, flint, florals, minerals, and grapefruit. Excellent length and balance, with underlying power—this will continue to impress for at least a decade. An effortless wine. | 95

Chardonnay 2013

Some development here, unsurprisingly, though considerably less than you might expect. Finely balanced, there is some complexity, but surely more to come. We have notes of orange rinds, cashews, spices, white peaches, and mango. A line of fine juicy acidity, laser-like focus and wonderful length. If ever a wine came from the fountain of youth, this might just be it. In another ten years, I suspect we will still be saying that it has many years ahead of it. | 96

DECADES

If Dawson James is a Tasmanian passion project from two of the old veterans the industry, Decades is very similar, with a pair of friends a little younger. Steve Flamsteed (of Giant Steps fame; he also worked with Leeuwin Estate, and it would be hard to find a better place for a Chardonnay apprenticeship, and he is also a chef and cheesemaker) and Brad Rogers (subsequently one of the founders of the much loved Stone & Wood Brewing Company), both far from their Queensland homes, met on day one of their enology degree at the Roseworthy Agricultural College, back in 1991. They have been great mates ever since and were keen to do something together. This is it. There really is something deliciously ironic about Queenslanders making some of the country's best cool-climate wines.

Decades? Well, it took them several decades to get the project off the ground. When a 2.7ha (6.7-acre) vineyard of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay (just 0.7ha [1.7 acres] of Chardonnay) in Tasmania's Coal River Valley, which had been planted back in 1990, came on the market, they grabbed it. The guys were delighted from a Chardonnay perspective, because the region is "about as far south as you can go, where the seasons are long and cool. This coupled with its cracking black clay over lime calcareous subsoil works perfectly for Chardonnay, we think." They have since added a further 7ha (17 acres), though just 1ha (2.5 acres) of Chardonnay, the 548 clone. The original clones? "We're not entirely sure what clone the existing Chardonnay is, but it works." They believe that their most important decision each year is the picking window. They employ wild fermentation, preferring larger-format French oak, and maturation in one-year-old seasoned French oak, with the wine left on full fermentation lees for almost a year. Malolactic fermentation is a year-by-year decision. Closure? "We feel the screwcap is technically superior to cork, although some of the trade ironically are asking for cork. It just doesn't make sense to package in an inferior closure when we have put so much work into growing the grapes and making the wine. We refuse to accept the 10% failure rate." Needless to say, production is tiny at this early stage. This will never be a large estate, but it will surely be producing some of our most thrilling wines.

Chardonnay 2024

From the Coal River Valley, the color is a gleaming pale yellow. Layered, generous, and plush. There is an intriguing lemon/eggnog character, along with a lovely saline freshness. Oyster-shell notes, citrus, dried herbs, pink grapefruit, and well-integrated oak are all present, as well as some bitey lemon on the finish. A seductive style with excellent length. This will drink beautifully for the best part of a decade. | 95

Chardonnay 2023

A touch difficult to get much distance between the two vintages on show when the project is so new, but the consolation is that we are in at the ground floor of something that is special. A lime/lemon hue. Taut, pristine, and perhaps showing a touch more finesse and refinement than its younger self. It comes from a cooler vintage. There are notes of citrus, florals, bergamot, grapefruit, and spices, with a flick of green apples. Deft oak integration. The wine exhibits weight and yet is in no way heavy. Indeed, it dances with a line of vibrant acidity. Beautifully crafted and very long. There is a flick of orange rind on the finish. Enjoy it for at least another decade. | 97

FREYCINET

One of Australia's most underrated wineries, it seems that everything it touches is always first class. These are wines of finesse, elegance, and quite often astonishing longevity. Claudio Radenti believes that the driver in producing premium Chardonnay in Tasmania "is the southerly latitude and the resultant cool climate that comes from being farther away from the equator than all other mainland Australian wine regions. Being surrounded by ocean means that Tasmania's climate is moderated and does not suffer from the extremes of heat and cold. The growing season is long as a result, which means nothing rushes to ripeness." The result are wines that are "uniquely remarkably elegant, with excellent purity and intensity of flavor, accompanied by good natural acidity balance providing tension and longevity."

Freycinet has a total of 16ha (40 acres) under vine, 4ha (10 acres) of which are Chardonnay, and it has been making Chardonnay since 1990. The fruit is hand-sorted on a vibrating table before whole-bunch pressing. The harder pressings are not used. Claudio uses four different coopers. From them he sources tight-grain French barriques for full barrel-fermentation. Approximately one quarter of the barrels are new each vintage. Maturation is for around ten months, with periodic *bâtonnage*. Malolactic fermentation depends on the season. Use of oak has been reduced over time. Without wishing to flog the proverbial dead horse, Claudio notes a significant change to his wines since 2005 with the introduction of screwcaps.

Chardonnay 2023

There is absolutely no reason to think that this wine will not enjoy the long and happy life we see with the 2007. Lemon sherbert, nutmeg, and cinnamon notes are evident on the nose, along with the merest flick of oak. We also have notes of pink grapefruit and touches of herbs, gunflint, florals, and white peaches. Good intensity and balance; there is vibrantly fresh, citrusy acidity, good energy, and impressive length. It will see the next 10–15 years as a doddle. | 94

Chardonnay 2007

Like many of Claudio's wines, this embraces the Benjamin Button effect, seemingly getting younger by the year. This is a whisker short of 20 years, and I would have no hesitation in putting it in a time capsule for another 10–15 years. It would need to be a very good white Burgundy, perhaps nothing less than a great grand cru, to engender similar confidence. This really is typical of the amazing longevity of the Freycinet wines. There are still flecks of green evident in the deep straw that is its color—amazing after all this time. The nose reveals notes of lemons, hazelnut, stone fruits, butterscotch, mandarins, and flint. The wine is bright and full of life, with serious length and the most appealing creaminess on the palate. Love it. | 97

STARGAZER (SAMANTHA CONNEW)

Samantha Connew is a New Zealander who, back in the 1990s, was studying law and working in a local wine bar in Christchurch. When it came time to make a choice as to the future, it was no contest. Sam then worked in many regions around the world, before setting up her own operation, Stargazer, in 2012. The name pays tribute to Abel Tasman, a famous explorer and navigator, the first European to set eyes on Tasmania, though others have suggested that it is named for the stargazer fish (an ugly thing that will bury itself in the sand if you hook one, making it extremely difficult to catch; you expect something large, given how difficult it is to move, but disappointment awaits). Sam believed that the Coal River Valley in Tasmania would allow her to make the Pinot Noir, Riesling, and Chardonnay in which she believed. In 2016, prior to which she had been buying fruit, she purchased 11ha (27 acres). At the time, the vineyard was just one 1ha (2.5 acres) of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Since then, she has planted a further 4ha (10 acres) and is eyeing more. She uses clones 76, 95, 96, and a few rows of 548. Winemaking is typical for the region. Wild fermentation, no added acid, and gentle use of oak. The use of malolactic fermentation varies depending on the conditions. Sam believes that the decision as to when to pick is critical, since the "raw product is awesome." She picks not on sugar ripeness but where she believes the alcohol will finish. The oak is 500-liter puncheons, which allow the wine to stay fresher. She likes the contribution from Mercuray oak and uses around 20% new. As for closures, she would be happy to change to a better option, but asked to choose between cork and screwcap, she replied, "Screwcap, of course—I'm not an idiot."

Chardonnay 2023

Fruit here is from the Coal River Valley/Derwent Valley. A very pale lemon hue, with notes of green apples, spices, pink grapefruit, pears, lemon cheesecake, gunflint, and beautifully integrated oak. There is paper-cut acidity running the length, with a long and lingering finish. A wine of balance, focus, and intensity—expect it to provide pleasure for at least another decade. |96

TOLPUDDLE

Michael Hill Smith MW and Martin Shaw, well known for their highly respected Shaw & Smith operation in the Adelaide Hills, purchased a vineyard in the Coal River Valley in Tasmania, the Tolpuddle Vineyard, in 2011. (As they tell the story, they went to Tasmania intending to buy nothing other than lunch.) Shortly after, winemaker Adam Wadewitz joined the team. In a little over a decade, they have turned this into the one of the more famous Australian Chardonnay vineyards. New plantings have been included, with vines at a higher density—6,060 vines/ha. They now have 13ha (32 acres) of Chardonnay, though it will be some time before the younger vines are considered for inclusion. The wines are made at the Shaw & Smith winery in the Adelaide Hills. From 2013, they have put the wines through malolactic fermentation. Maturation is for around 14–15 months in French oak barriques, one third of them new, before the wines are blended in stainless steel.

In their short history, they have picked up plenty of bling, including international awards for White Wine of the Year in 2022 and, recently, World's Best Chardonnay and Champion White Wine from the International Wine Challenge. As an aside, their Pinot Noir is equally revered.

Chardonnay 2023

It seems that the Tolpuddle Chardonnays simply cannot stop impressing the world. Not hard to see why. The immediate impression that this wine gives is of a complete wine, everything perfectly in its place. The nose offers a range of aromas, including hints of cashews, ginger, pears, spices, citrus, and florals. There is early complexity, which will no doubt build further, and a most seductive texture, with a touch of some oatmeal characters emerging. Fine balance, bright and zesty, and grapefruit acidity runs the length. It will handle the next decade with ease. |97

Chardonnay 2018

From vines planted in 1988, this a wine that seems to scream terroir—the Coal River Valley personified. The nose offers a range of aromas, including lemon curd, citrus, florals, cashews, a mineral note, and even a touch of freshly turned soil. Medium length. There is good energy and focus here, with a line of acidity a little reminiscent of what one might find with a very good gin and tonic. A superb Chardonnay to enjoy over the next six to eight years. |96

HOLYMAN

Joe Holyman was once known for his deft work behind the stumps as a record setting wicket-keeper. These days, his best work comes in the vineyard. The flagship Holyman Chardonnay comes from a 0.75ha (1.85-acre) block on the property that was planted in 1986. As Joe says, "In 1986, no one really cared about clones—I still don't—but we think it is what was known as Penfolds." Presumably, the P58, but as long as it works... Joe says that not even the person who planted the vineyard has any idea. Their first Chardonnay vintage was in 2005. Fruit is hand-picked and whole-bunch-pressed directly to new 500-liter French oak puncheons for fermentation, where it will remain on full solids for nine months. Screwcaps have allowed his wines to age for lengthy periods, and he is still enjoying his 2007.

According to Joe, "Tasmania is the best place in Australia to grow Chardonnay. The natural acidity is different and more profound here. I wouldn't swap it for anywhere." He does acknowledge the problem that Chardonnay fruit has here—most goes into sparkling wines. But he believes the quality of the still wines will ensure that they receive the attention they deserve.

Chardonnay 2023

An elegant style of Chardonnay: beautifully refined, even a touch lean. The nose reveals aromas weaving through grapefruits, lemon, crisp apples, spices,

minerals, and a slightly chalky backing. Fine, juicy acidity runs the length. The wine is very well balanced with really good length. Enjoy this for a decade. |94

Chardonnay 2018

Despite the years already under its belt, this is still delightfully youthful. We do see some complexity, but surely there is more to come. The nose exhibits notes of florals, stone fruits, hazelnuts, honeysuckle, matchsticks, and beeswax. Great balance here, with serious intensity and a delightfully creamy texture. Anytime over the next five to six years would be ideal. A cracker. |96

ADELAIDE HILLS

This is a region that owes much to some of the biggest names in Australian wine, with producers like Michael Hill Smith MW and Martin Shaw from Shaw & Smith and Brian Croser, who planted the Tiers Vineyard, established Petaluma, and now has his own Tapanappa operation. Chardonnay from here is focused and intense, showing great length and an array of flavors, including citrus and stone fruit. Complexity seems to be a given.

TAPANAPPA

When the megalithic Lion Nathan swooped on one of Australia's more famous wineries, Petaluma, in 2001, founder Brian Croser was able to retain the Tiers Vineyard. For many, this was the vineyard that established that Australia really could make first-class Chardonnay. It is still proving that today. It was also the first vineyard planted in the Piccadilly Valley in the Adelaide Hills since the 19th century. Few people in this country know more about Chardonnay than Brian Croser, and he is always generous in sharing his thoughts and the history in which he played such a crucial role.

Brian has noted that he learned about the "uniqueness" of Chardonnay while at Davis in California. The name Petaluma came from a local town in California. It helped inform his choice of site for a vineyard when he returned to Australia in the late '70s. At that time, "to grow great Chardonnay became a life's mission." The first fruit, for their 1977 Chardonnay, came from Cowra. By 1980, they were including fruit from Coonawarra, and in 1988 incorporated a percentage of Piccadilly Valley fruit. The first Petaluma Chardonnay that was 100% from the Piccadilly Valley was the 1990. The first single-vineyard Tiers Chardonnay was from 1996, and the first Tapanappa Tiers was from 2005. Over the years, replanting has seen the introduction of French clones on rootstocks and closer spacing of the rows.

Winemaking? Brian describes how it has gone full circle—"from totally protective Riesling-like processing at the beginning, preserving all of the native fruit, through full malolactic and lees stirring with 70% new oak in the '90s, to finally no malolactic since 2017, no lees stirring, and 30% new oak, retaining the protective winemaking." Site has always been a critical element in Croser's wines, long before most gave it a second thought. He believes that Tiers "is a very special vineyard in the Australian context. It is the epitome of a 'distinguished site,' delivering wines of distinction, unique to the vineyard and conforming with all of the parameters of wine greatness. Still fresh and intense at age, with complexity and an identifiable Tiers aroma and flavor. Great texture, tastes as it smells, complex flavors, balanced and long aftertaste. Tiers Chardonnays age for at least 20 years and are at their best at about 10 years." He believes his latest five releases have been his best wines but that the site will provide even better in the future. He is slowly replanting the vineyard—a project that he notes will finally be complete in another 60 years.

Brian had always believed that his vineyard consisted of the "University of California, Davis, clone known in South Australia as OF." The vines sold to him in the early '80s were identified as such. A long story for another time—but it appears they were no such thing and were "as far away from the California and French clones as Australia is from those locations on a map of the world. Looking backward through the supply chain as it was in 1982, it seems the Tiers was planted with a selection of Chardonnay that came illegally into South Australia, via Mudgee, Cowra, and Mildura, but was originally from Busby's brother-in-law's Kirkton Vineyard in the Hunter Valley. James Busby had imported Chardonnay from France and planted it at Kirkton in 1832." As mentioned elsewhere, it if works...

Tiers Chardonnay 2024

A wine of elegance and intensity with impressive persistence. The nose gives notes of cinnamon, grapefruit, florals, citrus, a flick of banana, and early

TASTING

evidence of the quality oak used throughout. Terrific energy radiates through the entire wine, which is finely balanced and offers a lingering finish. In time—and it surely has at least 15 years ahead of it—this should be an absolute classic. | 97

Tiers Chardonnay 2023

From the famous vineyard. Fermentation was in French oak barriques, one third new. Deft oak handling throughout. The nose offers hints of nutmeg and cashews, spices, lemon pith, florals, grapefruit, and lemon curd, the latter especially on the palate. There is a tiny tropical note edging in, with a flick of pineapple. An immaculate structure here, with oyster-shell acidity, knife-edge balance, and incredible length. Wow, this is a good Chardonnay. Enjoy it over the next 10–15 years. 575 dozen. | 97

Tiers Chardonnay 2017

The wine shows just how well Chardonnay from this vineyard can handle aging. A wine of complexity, elegance, and finesse. There is an exquisite nose here, with notes of peaches, figs, mango, honeysuckle, mandarins, florals, and spices, with exemplary oak integration. Juicy lemony acidity runs the length, and the intensity never wavers. It should handle another 12–15 years with ease. | 98

PETALUMA

The story of Petaluma is very much the story of Brian Croser, at least until the turn of the 21st century when the multinational Lion Nathan took control. No matter how much LN may have tried, it was always going to be difficult to follow one of the great acts of Australian wine. In fairness, it has taken considerable time, and no doubt part of the wines' current popularity relies on those with long memories. We are, however, seeing a greater focus on quality than we have for some time.

Today, the focus is on handpicked fruit that is whole-bunch-pressed. Lion Nathan flirted with wild ferments but has gone with selected yeast strains. Malolactic fermentation depends on vintage conditions. As well as the famous Yellow Label Piccadilly Valley Chardonnay, the team has now released a new flagship, the Anova Chardonnay. The latter will incorporate fruit from other parts of the Adelaide Hills, if deemed of sufficient quality. The team has moved toward larger, 500-liter puncheons rather than the smaller barriques used for many years. Small components will also be fermented in 1,000-liter amphorae. Closure? "With the reliability and consistency of screwcap over cork as evidenced in many vertical tastings of Australian wines, we are without a doubt staunch supporters of screwcap."

It is a new era for the Chardonnays of Petaluma and a most welcome one.

Anova Chardonnay 2023

Understandably, this is very youthful, and the oak is still coming together. Given time, it should impress. There are hints of nutmeg and a touch of splintery oak, along with peaches, nectarines, florals, grapefruit, and notes of oatmeal on the palate. Impressive length. The wine is well balanced and should provide pleasure for the next decade. | 95

SHAW & SMITH

Given the Shaw & Smith investment in Tasmania in the Tolpudde Vineyard, we won't go into any further depth here, other than to say that this operation has been crucial to the production of quality Chardonnay in the Adelaide Hills. The main reason for its inclusion is that it simply would not seem right to offer an article on Australian Chardonnay without including M3.

M3 Chardonnay 2015

From the Adelaide Hills, this is almost every Aussie's go-to Chardonnay when looking for quality at a great price. As we can see, it can also handle plenty of time in the cellar, and I would defy anyone to pick this as a decade old without a sneak peek at the label. Notes of lemon sponge cake, stone fruits, ginger, lemon curd, nectarines, and a hint of flint. There is beautifully integrated oak still evident in the background. This is a wine of complexity, depth, energy, and focus, with a lingering finish. One suspects it will easily handle another ten years. | 95

PENFOLDS

Penfolds simply turns winemaking on its head. Every other producer aiming to make quality Chardonnay looks first and foremost to site if not a single block or vineyard, then certainly a region. Penfolds flagship Yattarna takes fruit from anywhere across Australia, provided the winemakers believe it to be of sufficient quality. Of course, over the years, we have seen the regions narrowed down, but the wine is still very much a blend—it always has been, right from the first vintage released in 1998 (the 1995), and it probably always will be. Adelaide Hills is ever-present, and it is rare for Tumberumba not to be represented. Since 2006, Tasmania has played an important role, proving a more pure and pristine style. Other regions tend to come and go. There are even the occasional surprises, such as a small quantity of McLaren Vale Chardonnay in the very first offering, but these days cool climate is very much the theme.

Penfolds does, of course, make other Chardonnays, like its Reserve Bin A (introduced in 1994), which highlights Adelaide Hills fruit, and very occasionally the Cellar Reserve (first released in 2007), if a vintage is good enough. But the company is very much about house style first and foremost. While many winemakers will talk terroir until the proverbial cows come home, Kym Schroeter identifies the reality of the winemaker's involvement. Chardonnay "is the most versatile wine grape variety, with so much potential for trial and experimentation. Oak, no oak; malo, no malo; pick early, pick riper; warm ferment, cool ferment... Chardonnay is a real winemaker's wine, with so much opportunity to add a distinct stamp to it. Quite often you can tell who made a Chardonnay just by the style and subtle nuances that it possesses."

Kym Schroeter is Penfolds' white-wine maker. Like most producers, Penfolds is always tinkering to improve Yattarna. In recent years, fermentation temperatures have been allowed to become a little warmer, which enhances texture and complexity. It has refined the use of French oak and identified five cooperages for consistent use. Oak trials are ongoing. Kym's aim for Yattarna is "all about purity, finesse, elegance (but with intensity), power, and linearity. [Also] multiregional, with more emphasis on Tumberumba and Tasmanian ultra-cool-climate characteristics, including a citrus edge." Penfolds whites are bottled under screwcap, "to retain freshness and the fruity character of the wine."

Some will recall the extraordinary multi-vintage Chardonnay, Penfolds V, released a few years ago as a one-off. It was a blend of five of the very finest vintages of Yattarna—2011, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2021 (the 2021 not having seen the light of day at that stage)—a wine that did not reflect any specific vintage and came from all over the place. It was almost enough to have the Penfolds winemaking team drummed out of the union, and yet it was one of the greatest Chardonnays ever made in this country. There is much to say about the intricacies of terroir, but it is not the only way.

Yattarna Chardonnay 2023 (from the Penfolds Collection Preview)

It seems no time at all since the very first Yattarna, the 1995, released in 1998, created such intense interest and seemingly endless fuss. Since then, it has firmly established itself as one of our very finest Chardonnays. The wine is referred to as Bin 144 in Penfolds circles, because it made 144 trial blends before releasing that first vintage. The fruit hails from Tumberumba, Adelaide Hills, and Tasmania, and the wine spent eight months in French oak barriques, 60% of which were new, the remaining 40% just one year in age. The stunning quality of the 2022 means that this release has a very tough act to follow, but it is a standout for the vintage.

The color offers hints of straw. There is perhaps more oak evident at this early stage than we sometimes see with Yattarna, but it is deftly handled, and integration is proceeding apace. There is a spiciness already apparent and notes of stone fruits, citrus, and peaches, along with fresh oyster shells and limes. The wine has that exemplary Yattarna refinement. On the palate, those alluring lemon and peach notes are even more to the fore, while the oak fades to a minor supporting role. The wine has focus and serious length and is already exhibiting the first hints of the complexity that will surely continue to emerge. A ten-year proposition, and there is plenty of room for this wine to improve even further. It might not be a great Yattarna, but it is an extremely good one. | 97

Yattarna Chardonnay 2018

Even with considerable age under its belt, this wine is still youthful, with coiled power, seemingly waiting for the chance to be unleashed. A refined style, beautifully elegant, with immaculate balance, a silky texture, and extensive length. The oak has integrated so well that it is effectively invisible. On the nose, there is a flick of mandarins along with lemongrass, stone fruits, river stones, florals, and citrus. Grapefruit acidity runs the journey. A wine of such promise that to suggest it will easily handle another 15 years seems almost self-evident. | 98

MARGARET RIVER

There are great Chardonnays now from many regions in Australia, but unquestionably there are more great Chardonnays made in Margaret River than anywhere else. The Gingin clone has found its perfect home here, and the wines offer unmatched generosity, richness, and intensity, supported by fine natural acidity. And yet they can be ethereal and amazingly elegant. The wines have also shown extraordinary longevity. When an authority such as Jancis Robinson MW writes, "I spent all last week tasting 2016 Burgundies, but the more whites I tried, the more I lusted after the Western Australian alternatives I came across during a visit there," then perhaps it is time to acknowledge that this is a special place. Margaret River is simply one of the greatest Chardonnay regions on the planet.

PIERRO

Serve someone a Pierro Chardonnay, and I can almost guarantee the response: "Why on Earth don't I drink more of this stuff?"

Pierro was planted in 1980, in the Wilyabrup subregion, by young local doctor Mike Peterkin, who had an affinity for Burgundy and was one of the pioneers of the region. The soil is gravelly clay loam, with a high proportion of granite, and the vines are almost all the Gingin clone, with just 5% clone 95. The early wines were not quite what Mike was looking for, and so—after discussions with locals, including Robert Mondavi, who was then consulting for Leeuwin Estate—he took a different track, putting the wine through malolactic fermentation, which was simply not done in those days. He also looked to barrel-fermentation. Maturation is in Burgundian oak for 12 months; normally 50% of the barrels, or just under, are new. Needless to say, none of this was easy at a time when he was also operating a full-time medical practice, though in Margaret River, that was not uncommon. Since those early days, the Pierro Chardonnay has been unfailingly consistent and consistently excellent.

Chardonnay 2023

A pale green/gold in color, while the nose unveils notes of lemongrass, ginger, stone fruits, cashews, and a touch of oatmeal. There is serious intensity here, and the wine is beautifully layered. The tiniest hints of smoke add to the complexity, and the palate sees notes of peaches and figs emerge. Juicy citrusy acidity runs the length. This is a wine of finesse and balance that should drink beautifully for at least the next 10–15 years. | 96

Chardonnay 2018

The wine opens with notes of freshly baked lemon pie, supported by touches of apricot skins, ginger, citrus, and spices, with a chalky, slightly mineral backing. An absolutely gorgeous texture here, so seductive, with a line of fine acidity and impressive length. Still has a decade ahead of it. | 95

CLOUDBURST

The evocatively named Cloudburst Winery created a stir far in excess of its size when it commenced operations earlier this century. From vineyards little bigger than postage stamps, Will Berliner, American by birth, has crafted some of the most exciting wines seen in Australia for quite some time. Eyebrows were raised and fingers pointed when one looked at the prices, set at a level well above the other top wines for the region at the time. Whether or not those prices were/are justified, Will seems to have no trouble selling out. A newcomer demanding and receiving the sort of money Will was charging saw a number of local noses out of joint. One wonders whether they would have been better realizing that the best wines in the region are, in fact, massively undervalued. (Easy to say for someone who doesn't have to sell them.) Originally, Will had no intention of joining the local wine industry, moving to

the region because of its natural beauty. It did not take long for wine to take a hold. He planted vines in 2005, following biodynamic principles. Original plantings were 0.2ha (0.5 acre) of Cabernet Sauvignon, 0.2ha Chardonnay, and a mere 0.1ha (0.25 acre) Malbec. Will has subsequently doubled those plantings. He favors close planting because he believes it "brings out the inherent flavor of the land." For me, the Chardonnay is the superstar of the range. Cabernet can be spectacular, but Chardonnay consistently is. Situated in the "unofficial" subregion of Wilyabrup, Will notes that "everything is done by hand—think wheelbarrows and pitchforks rather than tractors and machinery." The soil is sand on lateritic granite, with limestone caves nearby. He employs hand-harvesting, whole-bunch-pressing directly into barrel, and wild ferments, with the wine left on lees for nine months.

Will tends to think of his wines not so much as Margaret River or Australian, simply the result of a vineyard that has never seen a chemical with the wines, made in the same manner every year to reveal just what the site can offer.

Chardonnay 2022

Medium-deep straw. The nose offers notes of stone fruits, hints of blood oranges, nougat, oatmeal, and gunflint, with peach pits and apricot skins, along with a hint of hazelnuts and cashews. This is wonderfully complex, with a fine line of acidity. We see notes of lemon curd and crème brûlée on the palate. An intense style with a mid- to long finish, this is a superb Margaret River Chardonnay that surely has the best part of a decade ahead of it. | 96

Chardonnay 2023

Lemon in color, with flecks of green, this is tight, youthful, poised, and taut, with good focus. The nose exhibits notes of grapefruit, flint, stone fruits, matchsticks, crisp pears, and mandarins. What incredible texture it offers, so seductive and yet with an appealing creaminess. A wine of amazing length with bright energy; there is great intensity here, and yet the wine still dances. Will has mastered that ever so difficult trick of giving the impression of weight and almost a heaviness, and yet ensuring his wine remains fresh and light. Stunning stuff, this will drink brilliantly for the next 10–15 years. | 98

WOODLANDS

One of the very first vineyards established in Margaret River, Woodlands was planted by the Watson family in the Wilyabrup subregion in 1973. Current winemaker Stuart Watson took over in 2002. It was not until 1985 that the family first planted Chardonnay, 0.8ha (2 acres) of the Gingin clone, which they now call Wente (apparently, because clones are not already confusing enough). It was the only clone available at the time. Wines from those early days show just how long-lived Margaret Chardonnay can be, but high winds and hail can sometimes reduce production to levels where it is simply not worth releasing. In 2013, they planted a further 7.3ha (18 acres) a couple of kilometers away from the original vineyard, "using *selection massale* from our own vines," at 5,000 vines/ha, much of the newer plantings going to the Brook Vineyard Chardonnay. Since 2012, the wines have been 100% barrel-fermented, and in recent years they have moved to 500-liter puncheons, which they believe provide the wines with more refinement. Their early experience with a famous Meursault—where six bottles of the same wine and same vintage were all very different—confirmed their belief in screwcap. For the family, what sets Margaret River Chardonnay apart is its ageworthiness. They are excited that the coming years will see the young vines reaching a maturity that will enable them to provide a consistent level of quality, matching the older plantings. They do see a threat to Margaret River Chardonnay in what is turning out to be the word of the month: affordability. It is difficult to make a sub- $A\$40$ bottle in the region. That may cause issues with those just looking for an enjoyable bottle of wine—but for serious fans of Chardonnay, it still places Margaret River in the bargain bin.

Brook Vineyard Chardonnay 2023

A youthful and yet quite muscular and powerful style, with all the generosity one expects from the region. There are notes of honeysuckle, gunflint, peaches, matchsticks, a hint of mango, and also some oatmeal notes. A Chardonnay for grown-ups. Fine, supple texture. The oak is immaculately integrated, and intensity is maintained on a very long finish. It should easily see its way through to providing pleasure for the next 10–15 years. | 95

TASTING**Brook Vineyard Chardonnay 2022**

Possibly a little more refined than the 2023, but we can put that down to differing vintage conditions and the exuberance of the younger year. We have hints of ginger, with grapefruit, florals, citrus, white jasmine, and stone-fruit notes. Good intensity and bright acidity throughout; there is impressive length, and the oak is superbly integrated. Much to like here. A decade. | 94

CHERUBINO

Larry Cherubino's Chardonnays come from various sites across Western Australia. The current Margaret River and Pemberton releases must surely be among the very finest he has ever made. Handpicked fruit is whole-bunch-pressed to tank before eventually transferred to oak. These days, he uses tight-grained oak, low in toast and large format, larger than 500 liters. Overall, Larry has reduced the use of oak across his wines. The vineyards and winemaking are not certified organic or biodynamic, but Larry makes a serious effort to ensure everything is sustainable and to maintain those principles. He believes that improved soil health has been a serious contributor to better tasting fruit and vine health. The difference between the wines from Margaret River and Pemberton? Larry notes they are both maritime climates but with vastly different rainfalls, ensuring very different wines. The vines from Pemberton are also 100% Gingin clone. Larry believes it is early days for his efforts in Pemberton, and there is much more he will be able to achieve.

Chardonnay Margaret River 2023

It should hardly come to us as a surprise to anyone, given that Larry Cherubino has been making stellar wine for decades, but his current collection of Chardonnays might just match anything he has done. This wine was fermented in a mix of new and one-year-old French oak, and given eight months maturation. A stunning nose, complex, lingering, and intense, yet the balance is knife-edge throughout. Notes of honeysuckle, oatmeal, stone fruits, glacé ginger, and gunflint are evident. The length is extraordinary. It will easily see 10–15 years. | 97

Chardonnay Pemberton 2023

We have included this wine as compelling evidence that Margaret River is not the only region in Western Australia providing excellent Chardonnay. The nose exhibits notes of ginger, spices, white peaches, citrus, nectarines, and a lovely, bright limoncello note. Juicy acidity runs the length, and the wine maintains full intensity. Beautifully balanced and very long, it should drink magnificently over the next 15 years. | 96

DEEP WOODS

Situated in the Yallingup Hills subregion, this estate was established in 1987, but it would be fair to say that its rise to the highest level came about after it was purchased by the Fogarty group and, more importantly, the arrival of Julian Langworthy as winemaker in 2011. His achievements have been extraordinary, even in a region where such sentiments seem daily utterances. In the time since his arrival, the estate has won more than 60 trophies and 200 gold medals.

As well as estate fruit, Julian sources from Wilyabrup and Karridale, focusing on the Gingin clone. While Deep Woods has some 40ha (100 acres) of its own Chardonnay, it also sources from a dozen growers across a range of local subregions. As a general guide to the winemaking, whole-bunch-pressing is followed by a wild fermentation and then time in a mix of new and seasoned French oak, with minimal stirring, before the wine spends nine months on lees. A self-confessed white-Burgundy tragic, Julian tries very hard "to drive the structure/tension" of the wine. He believes that the Margaret River region has "some of the most compelling Chardonnay in the world." He loves the "good fruit, power, and natural acidity" that the region attains.

Reserve Chardonnay 2023

Shimmering lemon in color, this is a touch more refined than the single vineyard. Beautifully balanced, with impressive length, the wine is focused and concentrated, offering notes of stone fruits, ginger, gunflint, mandarin, and a touch of nutmeggy/cinnamon oak. It should also handle a decade in the cellar

with ease and continue to develop complexity over that period. To be honest, the choice between these two is simply down to personal preference, but both are superb Chardonnays. | 95

Single Vineyard Wilyabrup Chardonnay 2023

At the time of tasting, this was all a bit of a secret project. Under cork, which is extremely rare for both Margaret River and Australian Chardonnay; the local price is sitting around A\$500, placing it very much at the pointy end. At that price, it also has to compete more than favorably with the better wines from Burgundy. It is intended largely as an overseas release, and Julian considers it his "Montrachet." There are only 100 dozen each vintage. A blend of parcels from three vineyards. The color is a golden hue, and there are notes of kumquats, hazelnuts, ginger, peaches, white chocolate, and nectarine. It is intense and muscular, giving an appearance of weight but dancing and not heavy in the least. There is complexity already evident, with a seductive, creamy texture and superb oak integration. Citrusy acid runs the length, and there are hints of lemongrass on the palate. At this stage, there are some green notes running through the wine, but it is early days, and this is undoubtedly designed for the long haul. If you can leave it in the cellar for the next five years and then enjoy it over the following 10–15, the benefits should be more than apparent. It will undoubtedly improve over that time. | 95

LEEWIN ESTATE

There might be no more famous Chardonnay in Australia than the Art Series Leeuwin Estate. Now one of Australia's wine icons, it raised eyebrows when the first release, the 1980, hit the shelves. At the time, it was priced well in excess of any of its competitors and had also spent far more time in the cellar. Not only that, but the Horgan family had adopted the Château Mouton-Rothschild concept of selected art for the labels. Those eyebrows hit the roof when that wine was named as one of the very best Chardonnays in the world by a British wine publication.

The story of Robert Mondavi's involvement in the establishment of Leeuwin Estate and his subsequent work with Denis Horgan has been told numerous times. It was Mondavi's suggestion to the Horgans that they plant Chardonnay on their cattle farm in the southwest of the state, which at the time was one of the remotest places on the planet, or so it seemed. They established a nursery and in 1975 planted the famous Block 20. Block 22 followed in 1977 and Block 97 in 1997. These are the three parcels that are the focus of the Art Series Chardonnay. The soils are pre-Cambrian granitic gneiss bedrock, with free-draining gravel loam on clay subsoil. The team attends to each parcel of Chardonnay discreetly, as required. Simone Furlong, Denis's daughter, notes that when they harvest, they are looking for "lime, pear, and nectarine." She describes the winemaking: "Roughly 70% is processed adopting skin contact, 30% is whole-bunch-pressed. Free drain and light press to 100% new, mainly Bordelaise coopered oak for fermentation. No malolactic fermentation after primary, only extensive *bâtonnage* weekly to build texture and cohesion. Total time in barrel 11 months, before light fining to bottling." The deft use of oak has always been crucial to the style. Simone continues, "100% new French oak fermentation and maturation has always been a hallmark of the Leeuwin Estate style. An enormous amount of focus goes into selecting the French oak we use on each parcel of fruit in our wines. We select barrels that are of super-tight grain for Chardonnay and of light to medium toasting, which really amplifies the shape and frame of both the nose and the palate. Each barrel provides its own footprint on the wine, whether that be structure, complexity, preservation of acidity, texture, and most importantly, preservation of fruit." The wine has been under screwcap since 2004. They take great pride in the wine's ability to age. A recent 2005 was one of the best wines I've seen in the past couple of years. The team has planted new vineyards with cuttings from its best vines, suggesting that the future is as exciting as the past. One of the reasons that the Gingin clone is so prolific in the Margaret River region is that the Horgan family's generosity saw cuttings of their precious vines provided to many prospective operations.

Art Series Chardonnay 2022

This iconic Australian Chardonnay never allows standards to drop, and this is yet another stellar effort from the great Chardonnay production line. A shimmering pale lemon, with notes of spices, lemon curd, ginger, pink

grapefruit, lemongrass, florals, peaches, nectarines, jasmine, and stone fruits. There is a whiff of smoky oak as well, and integration is proceeding well. There is complete balance here, with focus and energy. The wine is still very young, and it will certainly be better if you can wait for two or three years before opening—then enjoy it for a further 10–15 years. There is juicy acidity here, with a supple texture and a long and lingering finish, along which the intensity is maintained for the full journey. A cracker. | 97

Art Series Chardonnay 2021

It is fair to say that this Leeuwin Art Series Chardonnay will do its reputation no harm at all. For the vast majority of Australian wine lovers, this wine is always one of the very best Chardonnays made in the country. The old saying in the stock exchange is that the market is never wrong. Well, the wine market loves this wine, and it is not wrong. The only thing I would say is that it is perhaps a little more elegant, more gentle than usual, but I have no doubt that the magic of time will see it climb to its usual lofty heights and possibly the score will inch up a notch or two. The fermentation was by way of barrels—new French oak barriques—before 11 months' maturation and then blending. A gleaming, pale green-gold. A nose of immense class here, the wine is seamless, focused, and with a seductive, creamy texture. There are notes of cashews, white peaches, figs, and a mineral backing, with a hint of limes. Evocative and expressive, ethereal and elegant. Juicy acidity, knife-edge balance and excellent length, with intensity maintained. An intricately crafted Chardonnay, quite stunning. Fifteen to 20 years. | 98

Art Series Margaret River Chardonnay 2020

Always one of our very greatest Chardonnays—grand cru all the way. Crafted in 100% top-notch new French oak, on release this was considered by many to be as good as any they had made. Hard to disagree. The wine is the palest yellow, with a nose immediately screaming complexity. Hazelnuts, stone fruits, florals, pears, matchsticks, and spices; there is a fine mineral backing here, supporting the wine and maintaining intensity for the full, very long journey. Integration of the oak is immaculate. Touches of the lime notes, typical in this wine, are evident, as is that moreish salinity on the conclusion. Great intensity, and yet such is the balance that it seems almost imperceptible. Power, layering, elegance, and extraordinary length. | 98

Art Series Margaret River Chardonnay 2019

Just a brilliant wine, world-class. An extraordinary blend of opulence, fresh energy, purity of flavor, intensity, and length. Stone-fruit, lemon-zest, oyster-shell, and almond notes. Hints of mandarin and peach and even a touch of ripe mango. The oak is integrated well and will become even more so over the coming years. The focus is laser-like. Glorious now but so much more ahead, with more complexity and tertiary flavors to emerge. Expect this to be thrilling wine lovers in a decade. This release, as they all are, will inevitably be compared with the finest from both Australia and Burgundy. Different from both, but it sits very comfortably among the best. Wonderful now but still has so much more to reveal. | 98

Art Series Margaret River Chardonnay 2018

This is the wine that took Australian Chardonnay from the dark ages of oak-embalmed curiosities or simple sunshine in the bottle, to wines of supreme quality, able to sit comfortably with the great Chardonnays of the world. And it continues its magic. It always improves even further with time in the cellar. Fermentation in French oak and then a further 11 months in barrel. This wine explodes with stone fruit, nectarines, grilled nuts, peaches, and a hint of vanillin oak, but it is well integrated and quite transparent. A note of honey emerges on the finish. The creamy, supple, seamless texture is a highlight and promises to become ever more thrilling in the coming years. It is already showing some early complexity, and the flick of acidity carries it through to the extremely long finish—a finish that never drops in intensity. This wine confidently walks the tightrope between elegance and sheer power, but at all times—as with everything to do with this wine—it is impeccably balanced. 2018 was yet another truly brilliant vintage for the region. This scintillating Chardonnay will improve in the coming years, so be in no hurry. | 98

Art Series Margaret River Chardonnay 2005

Anyone doubting the ability of top-notch Australian Chardonnay to age brilliantly need look no further. Granted, this was a superb vintage for the region, but this wine was something truly spellbinding. Barrel-fermentation in a range of new French oak from different coopers, and the wine was blended after 11 months. Straw in hue, this was wonderfully complex and still alive. Finely balanced, with exotic aromas of stone fruits, grilled cashews, mandarins, mangoes, tropical characters, and a hint of citrus. Beautifully layered; the oak has long disappeared into the wine, adding to the richness and the seamless nature of the structure. A seductively creamy texture; a line of fine acidity is still evident, and the most extraordinary length seemed never-ending. This is a truly amazing wine and one that surely has another decade ahead of it if well cellared. | 100

VASSE FELIX

Another producer of stunning Margaret River Chardonnay; it really must sound like the proverbial broken record, but the wines that Virginia Willcock is making at Vasse Felix, particularly the flagship Heytesbury, are simply world-class. Virginia, who has just completed her 19th vintage at VF, describes part of her work as “accentuating the flinty funk, power, and tension of some very special vineyard plots. This winemaking approach continues to inform our house style.” She’s quick to identify advantages that Australia holds over France, such as not having the constraints of the appellation system, and notes that Australian winemakers can simply do whatever is best for the wine. She also suggests that some blocks love new oak, whereas others do not. While there is consistency among the blocks providing fruit for the very best wines, in some years they may not step up and can be put to one side for other wines.

This is another wine made largely from the ubiquitous Gingin clone, and Virginia talks of the “power and al dente tension—characters exclusive to only a handful of revered blocks in the Vasse Felix vineyards,” describing it as “a deep and layered, terroir-led Chardonnay.” She sees the use of Gingin in Margaret River as “serendipitous” and finds that this clone can preserve acidity through ripening better than any other clone with which she works. This becomes critical to the power of the wine. Fortunately, it is ideally suited to the maritime/Mediterranean environment. 100% wild fermentation, maturation in French oak, and then time on lees is a standard method of production, because it works. She describes the house style as having a “struck-match/flint/lamb-fat note.” Needless to say, the 2023 is something very special. Heytesbury is a combination of a number of plots, meticulously selected. In 2023, the final result was 70% from their Gnarawary Vineyard in Wallcliffe, and 30% from the Home Vineyard in Wilyabrup. The wine spent nine months in French oak barriques (52% new) and a further seven months “harmonizing” on lees in tank. Virginia identifies the excitement surrounding the 2023 vintage but also notes how ridiculously good 2018 was. She also thinks 2020 might come to be seen as a dark horse. For drinking at the moment, 2013 and 2014 are looking “mind-bogglingly good.”

Heytesbury Chardonnay 2023

Focusing on the region’s favorite clone, Gingin, the wine had nine months maturation in French oak barriques, 52% of them new. Gorgeous aromas here, with flint, mandarin, glacé orange rinds, lemon sponge cake, white peaches, and ginger. So much packed into a single glass. The balance is superb, the length impressive. This is a wine that dances, and it will surely continue to improve for at least the next 10–12 years. | 97

CULLEN WINE

One of the most revered wineries anywhere in Australia, Cullen Wines has been at the top of its game for many years, producing some of the finest Chardonnay (and Cabernet Sauvignon), made in Margaret River. Vanya Cullen has held the reins for a long time now, taking over from her parents, who were some of the earliest pioneers in the region. The top Chardonnay is named for her father, Kevin John, who always believed that the Wilyabrup subregion could produce Chardonnay to challenge the best in the world. He has been proved right many times. So firm was Kevin’s belief that he established the International Chardonnay Tasting in 1986. It is still one of the world’s great events focusing on this grape.

TASTING

Vanya has taken the estate down the biodynamic path, and it really does seem as though the wines get better year after year. She describes their winemaking process as follows: “We hand-harvest on fruit and flower days, guided by the moon. We sort them at the table, but prior to that we taste the grapes each day during harvest to see exactly when they’re ready. We do a little bit of whole-bunch amphora-fermentation, while the pressed juice is placed into a concrete egg and biodynamic ‘flower day’ barrels. Fermentation is natural, using indigenous yeasts and no additions—letting the land’s song sing loudly through the wine.”

The Chardonnay was planted in 1976, the Wente clone. (Others call it the Gingin clone, but it seems much work on exact identification remains to be done.) Vanya has described her biggest evolution as occurring in 1998, when both her mother, Diana Cullen, and Vanya felt that the change to organic viticulture was “the right direction for our vineyard.” Biodynamic certification followed in 2004. “As a result, our wines show enhanced expression of fruit, minerality, and integration of flavors. They have higher natural acidity and a pure expression of terroir.” For Vanya, “Chardonnay has personality. It can be fine and elegant, bold and lustful, refined and mysterious. It’s an exciting variety that tempts wine drinkers to continue exploring. Every region produces unique characteristics, and each winery has individual style and distinction. There really is a Chardonnay for everyone.”

Kevin John Chardonnay 2024

Always one of our greatest Chardonnays, not just a great Margaret River Chardonnay. Full biodynamics as always, Gingin clone from plantings made between 1976 and 1988, largely new oak. We are seeing this wine released in the new lightweight bottles—environmentally positive, though it does seem to rob the wine of some of its gravitas. Fortunately, it is what is in the bottle that counts. A straw/lemon hue, this is a very youthful Chardonnay, but it is elegance personified, with energy and focus and the signs of early complexity. There is a beautifully creamy texture here, with fine, citrusy acidity. The nose offers notes of peaches, florals, ginger, hints of nectarine, bergamot, and lemon curd. This is poised and taut, a wine of precision; long and lingering. There are notes of oatmeal on the palate. Leave it for a couple of years, and it will be very special. Then enjoy for a further 12–15 years. | 97

KJ Flower Day Legacy 2024

This really is a “drink on bended knee with head bowed” kind of wine. Harvested on a single day—a flower day in the biodynamic calendar—this is simply thrilling. A mere 600 bottles were made. Sure, it is not for everyday drinking, but it should be on every bucket list. The team used whole-bunch carbonic maceration in beeswax-lined amphorae. Maturation was for six months in new French oak puncheons. Deep yellow in color, this is Chardonnay with an entirely new level of intensity of flavor. We have notes of lemon curd, cashews, stone fruits, glacé orange rinds, honeycomb, fresh croissants, and citrus. A wine of immense complexity and great length, notwithstanding the enormous generosity of flavor; it is perhaps the textural aspects that are the highlight here. The wine has power, length, concentration, and balance. Extraordinary length, actually, and it should drink beautifully for the next 15–25 years. How many of us wouldn’t be just a little bit nervous putting away our white Burgundies for 25 years? We need have no such concerns here. | 98

Kevin John Chardonnay 2023

From the excellent 2023 vintage in Margaret River, the Kevin John Chardonnay is Cullen’s “standard” Chardonnay—and yet what a wine it is, never being less than thrilling these days. The fruit for this wine was harvested over a three-week period and then whole-bunch-pressed before fermentation in a mix of vessels—biodynamic puncheons, amphorae, and a concrete egg. Eight months’ maturation in the puncheons, 80% new. The wine is 100% Gingin clone. Balance, elegance, and complexity are the hallmarks here, even at this early stage. Great energy. The nose gives us notes of cashews and other nuts, along with peaches, stone fruit, a hint of river stones, and orange blossoms. Vanilla, florals, honeycomb, and a hint of crisp pear. The focus is superb, through to an impressively long finish. Expect this to drink magnificently for at least 15 years. | 98

Kevin John Moon Day Chardonnay 2022

There was a time when, if one wanted to talk about Australia’s greatest Chardonnays, it tended to be a debate between Giaconda and Leeuwin Estate—or more likely, how good they both were, any final decision coming down to personal preference. These days, Cullen has muscled into the argument, deservedly so, with vintage after vintage of world-class offerings. This is not just with its standard (though there is nothing “standard” about it) Kevin John, but with the amazing special releases from Vanya. Thrilling stuff. These wines sit not just with the very best from this country but with the best from anywhere, including Burgundy. After my tasting, there was no way these wines were going down the sink, so I took them to a lunch with friends, where they were up against a Montrachet from a famous name. It was no contest. The trio soared, while the Montrachet slunk off with its tail between its legs. That won’t always happen, of course (the Montrachet was off its game), but it does show that these wines sit comfortably with the best. Harvested on a full-moon day, the bunches went into amphorae for three days, before pressing to a flower-day puncheon, for fermentation and four months’ maturation. The thoughts that come to mind here include elegance, balance, a seamless nature with great length, impressive concentration, and the quality of etherealness. This is a wine with such intensity, with a layered palate. Citrus notes here are to the fore, with orange rinds and glacé lemons. A fine line of grapefruit acidity. Florals and pears, with mandarins on the finish. Wonderful stuff. A brilliant Chardonnay, this has the structure to last 15–20 years, if you can hold on that long. | 98

Kevin John Flower Day Chardonnay 2022

The other special-release Chardonnay from the 2022 vintage was picked on Valentine’s Day, which happened to be a full-flower day (which seems appropriate). Whole bunches went into clay amphorae, lined with beeswax. Pressed after two days on skins, the juice was then transferred to a flower-day puncheon (meaning the puncheon was coopered on a flower day) for a stint of four months’ maturation after fermentation. This is punchy, focused, and concentrated. There are notes of lemons, nuts, figs, peaches, touches of honeysuckle, and an array of stone fruit. There is a fine line of saline acidity. Impeccably balanced and with seriously good length, this is so exciting now, but it has 10–15 years ahead if well cellared. | 97

KJ Flower Day Legacy 2021

A superbly complex wine. There is still a hint of oak to integrate, but it is the balance and the intensity for the full journey that impress. Seductive texture; there are notes of peaches, lemon curd, spices, white jasmine, stone fruits, and hints of oatmeal, with a flick of citrus and grapefruit. Ever so finally balanced. It is early days for this wine, but it will prove to be very special. | 97

Kevin John Chardonnay 2019

Just where one ranks Kevin John Chardonnay among Australia’s best will come down to personal preference, but it would surely make the top few, every vintage. This is a Margaret River gem. Conditions in 2019 meant that this is the smallest volume since 1997, largely due to frost. Birds were a problem for those without nets (fortunately not Cullen). Only 3,972 bottles made. Harvesting occurred February 12–28; one picking was on a “Moon opposite Saturn flower day” and the rest on fruit days. This is all part of the biodynamic calendar, taken extremely seriously at Cullen Wines. This will be something either fully understood or perhaps raise eyebrows. If the latter, I’d suggest looking at the results. Clearly, whatever they are doing works. Bunches were hand-harvested, then whole-bunch-pressed and the juice racked to barrel. The fruit, which was harvested on the “Moon opposite Saturn day,” was fermented in amphorae before aging in puncheons. 100% natural malolactic fermentation and a total of eight months in French oak, 30% new. Opens with stone-fruit notes, hints of pear, oatmeal, lime, and peaches. Alluringly fragrant. A complex, finely crafted Chardonnay and one that will certainly do nothing but add to the illustrious lineage of the KJ Chardonnay. The oak is extremely well integrated. This is intense and yet so light on its feet. Gloriously supple texture and offering a fine flick of acidity. Peach notes, fig, quince, apricot kernel, and more on the palate. Finely balanced. A beautiful, complex Margaret River Chardonnay that just soars. Ten to 15 years ahead. An absolute cracker. | 97

There was a time when, if one wanted to talk about Australia's greatest Chardonnays, it was a debate between Giaconda and Leeuwin Estate. These days, Cullen has muscled into the argument, with vintage after vintage of world-class offerings

XANADU

Glenn Goodall, who has been guiding Xanadu for a quarter of a century, produces two flagship Chardonnays: the Reserve and Stevens Road. Both are single-vineyard wines. Boodjidup, in the Wallcliffe subregion, is not a district often spoken about, but Glenn notes that it "is home to a disproportionate amount of great sites (from other producers also)." For Glenn, the winemaking follows the standard path we see with most top producers. He describes it as "pretty simple: hand-picked, whole-bunch-pressed, wild ferment; hopefully the expression of the Gingin clone, and the different sites, is what shines through the most in the wines."

For the Reserve Chardonnay, the fruit comes from the original Lagan Estate block planted in 1981. It is a 3ha (7.5-acre) vineyard located next to the winery on Boodjidup Road. Despite the Chardonnay being planted back in 1981, the team did not release a Reserve until 2008. (Stevens Road followed the next year.) Glenn describes the wine as "a modern Australian style. Generous in flavor, with tight acidity, fine and focused. Probably at the racier (acidity) end of the spectrum, but essentially it is the fingerprint of the Gingin clone and the vineyards that are driving the wine [...] hopefully offering 'substance over style' with purity of fruit rather than funky, oaky wines." He sees the Reserve as having become tighter over the years. Originally using around 40% new oak, that has been throttled right back in recent years to around half that. The wines have never looked better. The final question for Glenn was simple: Why Chardonnay? The answer was just as uncomplicated. "Greatest white variety on the planet!" He sees the future as very bright, believing that the "diversity that celebrates exceptional sites in exceptional regions will future-proof the success of top-end Australian Chardonnays."

Stevens Road Chardonnay 2022

An intriguing and appealing nose here, with notes of figs, ginger, apricot kernels, spices, lemongrass, slight hints of toasty oak, well integrated, and a mineral backing. A line of grapefruit and saline acidity runs the length. Very impressive balance and a lengthy finish; this is still very young and needs more time. Ten years should not trouble it. | 94

Reserve Chardonnay 2022

Pale lemon in color, with flecks of green, this is powerful but still very youthful and needs all the time you can give it. There is tight oak, which is in the process of integration. The nose reveals notes of stone fruit, peaches, and mandarins, with a line of grapefruit in support. Juicy, citrusy acidity and a seamless texture; this is seriously impressive and promises so much. Twelve to 15 years will ensure that you have something very special in the cellar. | 96

MOSS WOOD

Another of the region's pioneers... There was a time some years ago when I wondered if we were seeing a little too much variation in the Moss Wood Chardonnays. At their best, as good as one could wish, but there seemed to be a few vintages where they dipped, for want of a kinder way of putting it. Whether that was my imagination or not, it certainly has not been an issue for many years. These are stellar Chardonnays and wines I very much look forward to seeing every year.

The estate was established by Bill Pannell in 1969, and the Mugford family has had an involvement since the late '70s, including purchasing the place. Chardonnay was first planted in 1976, with the first vintage being 1983. The top Moss Wood wine still comes from that single-vineyard site. Winemaking

begins with hand-picking and hand-sorting, before clarification by flotation. Fermentation begins in stainless steel and is completed in barrel. The wine then spends a year and a half in French oak, 50% of the barrels new. The team has used five different Burgundian cooperages for many years. The Gingin clone accounts for 86% of the wine, with the remaining 14% a mix of Dijon clones. The track record of these wines confirms just how well they can age and how complex they can become during the journey.

Chardonnay 2023

Amazing to think that Moss Wood's oldest Chardonnay vines are now 48 years of age. Fermentation for this cracking Chardonnay was finished in 228-liter French oak barriques. The wine was then blended in tank and returned to barrel, 49% new, for the next year and a half. The color here is a deep but attractive lemon gold. A superb Margaret River Chardonnay. Complexity is already evident, as are notes of stone fruits, cashews, oatmeal, ginger, lemongrass, peaches, and immaculate oak handling. The supple, creamy, cushiony texture is an absolute highlight. A wine of fine balance and serious length, this has at least a decade ahead of it. A stunner. | 96

Chardonnay 2022

A vintage of contrasts but certainly yet another of the seemingly endless procession of superb years in Margaret River. The juice was clarified in stainless steel, seeded with an array of yeasts for a controlled ferment. Racking to oak, 228-liter French oak, 54% of which was new. Full malo, blending of all components, and then back to oak for 16 months. Margaret River Chardonnay has firmly established itself as one of the great styles of Australian wines, and this is simply yet more evidence. Pale yellow-gold hue, while the nose offers florals, figs, citrus, a hint of pear, and a touch of honey. Peaches and an early note of nougat. There is quality oak, giving the character of grilled cashews, but the integration proceeds apace. It seems to me that this vintage of the Moss Wood Chardonnay is a little more elegant than is usual. A really impressive, refined wine, exhibiting early complexity. There is a fine line of acidity, with excellent length. Balance and an appealing texture. There is room to improve further over the next six to eight years. | 94

Chardonnay 2021

If one may begin with the bottom line, I think that this is the very best Moss Wood Chardonnay I have seen for a very long time, and it sits with the finest the region can offer. Perhaps the cooler vintage suited the style a little more. The future will reveal if that is so. The fruit was whole-bunch-pressed, settled, and seeded with a variety of yeasts for fermentation that sees the juice transferred to French oak barrels, half new, at the halfway mark. Maturation then continues for over a year. Straw yellow, it is immediately apparent that this is one of the more complex Chardonnays you'll find. Wonderful stuff. The nose exhibits cashews, mandarins, white peaches, and stone fruit, through to a fabulous palate, immaculately balanced and with unrelenting intensity. There is oak, but it has melded so well that you hardly notice it. Supple, creamy, and a finish that seems to linger forever. Hints of lime marmalade. An absolutely brilliant Marg River Chardy. Stunning. And it should live for many years. | 98

Chardonnay 2020

This is an exciting Chardy from Moss Wood. (Aren't they all?) Scintillating color, the greens mixing with a pale sunrise. Notes of limes and lemons, some ginger. Good oak integration adds to the complexity. A ripe style, with rock melon, herbs, and nuts. It really needs another three to five years, though it is attractive now, with a lingering finish. Give it time—it will reward you. | 94

Chardonnay 2008

A glorious mature Margaret River Chardonnay, this is deep gold in color, offering obvious depth and maturity. The nose exhibits notes of hazelnuts, stewed peaches, honeysuckle, and gunflint. Fully developed and utterly delicious; there is power and intensity, and yet we still have refinement. Immeasurably long, this is finely balanced throughout. Still fully alive, but there seems no legitimate reason not to enjoy it now. | 98