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Margaret River is a defined geographical indication wine region located in southwest WA. There are more than 5,000ha (12,350 acres) under vine and between 150 and 200 wineries (depending on definitions and whose figures one looks at), most of them “boutique” in nature—and the number is higher if one includes the grape growers. Some 60 percent of wineries produce fewer than 15,000 cases annually. While the production is minimal by comparison with many regions in Australia, Margaret River is one of the largest in area— 62 miles (100km) north to south and up to 17 miles (27km) wide—213,000ha (526,000 acres) in total. The boundary to the west is, of course, the Indian Ocean. So far, happily, Margaret River has remained phylloxera-free.

From then to now

From nothing, just 50 years ago, Margaret River has become a region (granted, still a very small one in terms of its contribution to the world of wine) offering Chardonnays that sit comfortably alongside the finest premiers crus, or even grands crus, of Burgundy, while also establishing a reputation for stellar Cabernets and a fascinating array of other wines. Compelling evidence, perhaps, of the benefits of avoiding the chokehold of an overly strict appellation system? In addition, in most instances, the value offered by these wines makes a mockery of the prices attained by top Bordeaux and Burgundy.

From a few medical practitioners keen on wine sharing a vision, to some of the finest wines on the planet, the full story is told by Forrestal and Jordan—but the abridged version is that two research scientists, American professor Harry Olmo and local doctor John Gladstones, identified the region's potential. Locals, more used to dairy farms, native forests, and surfers, remained skeptical. Olmo had come from the University of California to ascertain the potential of the Swan Valley as a wine region. It didn't take him long to realize that his efforts were better directed elsewhere, though his hosts in the Swan were not best pleased to hear that.

He was followed by local authority John Gladstones, who published an extensive report on the climate and soils of the region in 1967, noting high winter rainfall (meaning the need for sites with good drainage); dry, warm summers; little in the way of frost or hail; and soil generally gray loam on a subsoil of clay. Importantly, this is a region heavily influenced by its maritime climate and location; the locals are fond of telling you that they have ocean on three sides. A low diurnal and seasonal temperature range means Margaret River enjoys an even accumulation of warmth. The climate is perhaps best described as similar to Bordeaux in a dry vintage.

HOW THE WEST WAS WON (AND KEEPS WINNING)

Ken Gargett charts the astonishing rise of the beautiful Margaret River region, which was first planted just half a century ago, but now produces some of the world's finest Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon

Should you ever find yourself in the township of Margaret River on a Saturday morning, it is de rigueur to join the shambling throng, walk up the hill past the school and experience the local farmers' market. Endless stands, ramshackle and state-of-the-art, offering olive oils, spices, honeys, coffee (Kombi Coffee is your best bet), fudge, and more—19 types of milk, none of which have anything to do with a cow. Here you will literally find the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker. An intriguing mix of surfer cool, hippie relic, curious tourist, and local farmer.

Hidden away is a tent with a range of local meats. Behind the counter, a slim, gray-bearded man in his peaked cap talks to

regulars in his usual laconic manner. If those snapping selfies and celebrities knew that they were within photographic distance of Margaret River royalty, the man who really put the region on the map (not to mention what he did for New Zealand), they might point those phones in a different direction. David Hohnen, by winning consecutive Jimmy Watson trophies in the early 1980s with Cabernets from his Cape Mentelle winery, turned the place from a vinous curiosity into a fledgling wine region with genuine aspirations. (For the record, David, recently awarded the Order of Australia, is still involved in the wine world, though not via any one winery. With his meats as well, he is, as he puts it, “busier than a one-legged kickboxer.”)

Within a decade, Veuve Clicquot had purchased 50 percent of Cape Mentelle, the rest in 2000, confirming the potential the region offered. Of course, David was far from alone in transforming the region, but one doubts whether the early pioneers had the slightest clue as to how far this astonishing district would come and how quickly they would achieve a reputation for some of the world's finest wines.

It is easy to forget that this region, renowned for some of the planet's best Cabernets and Chardonnays, kicked off only 50 years ago. We touched on the history of Margaret River, and the personalities involved, in our recent review of Peter Forrestal's and Ray Jordan's comprehensive look at how the region began in *The Way It Was* (WFW 59, pp58–59). The endless potential of the region attracted many of the nation's finest winemakers. Superb quality in the vineyards, classic varieties and talent in the winery—a powerful combination. The cherry on top? A region that never seems to suffer the indignity of a “lesser” vintage. Year after year, it enjoys brilliant conditions. Sure, they vary, but it seems only in levels of superlatives.

Situated around three hours south of Perth in Western Australia (surely the most remote wine region on the planet), Margaret River is a bucket-list destination for wine lovers, with beautiful scenery, great food, accommodation at every level, and enthralling wines. No one ever seems to leave disappointed.

Opposite: “Margaret River is a region heavily influenced by its maritime climate and location—the locals are fond of telling you that they have ocean on three sides.”

Photography courtesy of Margaret River Association



Within two years of Gladstones's report, vines were planted. Within five years, wineries such as Vasse Felix, Cape Mentelle, Cullen's (which is now one of the country's leading biodynamic producers), and Moss Wood were up and running. Others—including Leeuwin, Woodlands, and Sandalford—soon joined them.

Denis Horgan, a merchant banker, purchased his property, Leeuwin, in 1969. He was not some would-be hobby farmer—rather, the property was attached to a plumbing business he wanted. The property remained vacant for several years, until he received a curious phone call from an attorney in Seattle, making enquiries. Horgan is no fool, and realizing that it was highly unlikely that someone from Washington State was interested in a Margaret River plumbing business, a little work revealed that the client was none other than Robert Mondavi. Denis and wife Trish decided that perhaps they would be better looking at vines rather than valves. Mondavi, however, did have a further influence on the vineyards and wine styles: It was his recommendation that they plant Chardonnay.

These days, that may seem like a no-brainer, but at the time, this variety was almost unknown in Australia. Tyrrell's had only just released the country's first commercial Chardonnay, its 1971 Vat 47. It turned out to be an inspired decision, and it was not long before the Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay took its place as Australia's leading Chardonnay. These days it has plenty of competition, not least from some close neighbors, but if there is ever an Aussie Hall of Fame for wines, it will certainly have a place. In the early days, one would have been far more likely to find a bottle of Margaret River Riesling than Chardonnay. Today, of course, things are very different, and Cabernet Sauvignon is perhaps even more important than Chardonnay. That a region should be so blessed to have both a red and white variety making such brilliant wines is almost Burgundian (ironically enough).

CAPE MENTELLE INTERNATIONAL CABERNET SAUVIGNON TASTING

In 1982, Margaret River was barely a blip for even the most wine-obsessed of us. Cape Mentelle was yet to turn that on its head by winning successive Jimmy Watson Trophies, but it was not too early for David Hohnen and his team to start a tradition—one that has now become Australia's most famous annual tasting and one of the longest-running such events in the world: the Cape Mentelle Cab tasting, as it is known.

I've had the good fortune to attend a number of these (not sure how many—never enough, is the correct answer—but each exceeds the previous). It's a must for every wine lover's bucket list. Over time, the format has varied little. Several hundred devotees—local, interstate, and offshore, some from the wine industry, others just fans (many come every year)—crowd into the barrel hall to long tables covered with a glittering array of Riedel glasses. The wines, all blind, are served in three brackets. Obviously, Margaret River is well represented, but there will also be top Bordeaux, Napa, Italians, Kiwis, other Australians, and an occasional star from elsewhere. All wines will be from the same vintage (three years old, so attending last November—it is held on the same weekend as the local Gourmet Escape—meant we were looking at the wonderful 2015 vintage). After each bracket, guest speakers give a few thoughts (occasionally even about the wines), before we file back in and repeat. After the tasting, the wines are revealed, and we all express the standard disbelief that we couldn't pick more of them. Endless debate over the stars and shortcomings continues over a long lunch, where all of the wines magically reappear and one can enjoy them as their makers intended.

Who wouldn't want to spend a morning tasting their way through wines such as Wynn's John Riddoch Coonawarra Cabernet; Stonyridge Larose from Waiheke Island off Auckland in New Zealand; Chile's Alma Viva; the beautifully elegant and seamless Newton from Napa; the wonderfully complex Léoville-Las-Cases; the intense and complete Montrose; and the amazing Mouton Rothschild (described, bizarrely, by one winemaker as "Jesus in underpants"). There were also plenty of others from all around the globe and an array of the very best from Margaret River itself.

Among those keen on official subregions is Vanya Cullen, and as anyone who has ever met Vanya knows, she has extraordinary drive and determination. Her view is that the time is right and that Gladstones's 1999 map—"an independent map of subregions by a world-recognized, independent scientist"—shows the best way forward

Now

Even now, the region accounts for just 3 percent of Australia's total wine production, though when it comes to premium wine, this figure rises to 20 percent. Recent figures for the 2018 crush reveal 7,929 tonnes (8,740 US tons) of Cabernet, 6,837 tonnes (7,536 US tons) of Chardonnay, 9,164 tonnes (10,101 US tons) of Sauvignon Blanc, and 7,547 tonnes (8,319 US tons) of Semillon. The total harvest was 25,746 tonnes (28,380 US tons).

Things change quickly. In 2016, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon led the way, with 7,449 and 6,404 tonnes (8,211 and 7,059 US tons) respectively. This pair usually appear as a blend known as Classic Dry White, good examples showing vibrant acidity, crisp citrus and stone fruit, and good intensity. Cabernet Sauvignon was 6,460 tonnes (7,120 US tons); Chardonnay close at 5,569 (6,138 US tons), Shiraz with 4,244 (4,678 US tons), and Merlot 2,610 (2,877 US tons). The total crush was 31,600 tonnes (34,833 US tons). In 2017, that rose to 42,000 tonnes (46,297 US tons), the largest in the record books, and significantly more than 2018. 2012 saw 35,800 (39,462 US tons), similar to 2008, 2007, and 2004. The most recent vintage under 20,000 tonnes (22,046 US tons) was in 1999. There are smaller plantings of Chenin Blanc and Verdelho, while alternative varieties, such as Tempranillo and Nebbiolo, are making an appearance. All told, 36 different varieties are now grown in the region.

Only around 10 percent of its wines are exported—but many do not even make it to the eastern states of Australia—but the great names are represented in the major international markets of the UK, USA, and Asia. In recent years, the Classic Dry White style has struggled, thanks largely to the Kiwi Sauvvalanche. The once hugely popular and very profitable style still sells reasonably well, but nothing like at its peak. One winery confided that sales had plummeted from more than 5,000 cases annually to just 100. While this might seem like "one of those things," it had the unforeseen consequence of putting considerable pressure on prestige wines. The quick return on SSB blends—off the vine, through the winery, and onto the shelves within months—helped finance premium Cabernets and Chardonnays, covering the cost of oak barrels and making longer maturation times possible. Without that instant money, some encountered difficulties.

Chardonnay is very successful in a number of regions throughout Australia, though these days Margaret River Chardonnay is considered the equal of any. Based on the Gin Gin (the name of a Houghton vineyard) or Mendoza clone, brought

Opposite: Cape Mentelle, the name given it by the French expedition that charted the coast in 1801, later borrowed by the Hohnen brothers for their nearby winery.

to the West in 1957 by Houghton's—some say as an experiment to detect viruses—it provides a richness of citrus and tropical fruit flavors, plus a complexity, depth, and exuberance not often encountered elsewhere. It also provides fruit that winemakers can work with, often manipulating it in intriguing new ways. This clone does suffer from *millerandage* ("hen and chicken"), meaning that the better wines tend to be those picked at full ripeness, the smaller berries contributing vital acidity.

As good as the Chardonnay can be, it is arguable that the great grape of the region is Cabernet Sauvignon. A thumbnail sketch of Cabernet in Australia reveals that when Max Schubert first made Grange, in homage to the finest wines of Bordeaux, he chose Shiraz, not Cabernet. There simply was not enough quality Cabernet at the time. Eventually, around the 1970s, Cabernet took over as the great red wine of Australia, and Coonawarra was the undisputed leader in quality. A decade on, Hohnen and his Cape Mentelle Cabs ensured that Margaret River finally made it onto the radar, but there was no serious thought then that Coonawarra would be eclipsed. A decade or two is a long time in the wine world, though, and today the shift in power is effectively complete. Only a diehard Coonawarra fan could reasonably claim that their wines enjoy a higher profile or higher prices than those from Margaret River.

It is hard—indeed, impossible—to think of a Margaret River winery that does not produce at least one Cabernet or Cab blend, Merlot being the preferred partner in most cases, though Malbec is appealing more and more to locals. As a general description, the Cabernet exhibits an appealing sweet core of dark fruit, the ripeness providing a degree of voluptuousness. Tannins are traditionally gravelly, though not intrusive, and considered very much as part of what the terroir transmits. The fruit never seems to veer down the herbaceous, green-leaf route, though it is hard to tell whether that is a matter of terroir or simply the long run of good vintages. Margaret River Cabernet is an enticing blend of power and elegance.

Subregions

This is a touchy subject in the Margaret River. Currently, there are no official subregions. It is not particularly contentious at the moment, and most local winemakers tend to support the status quo, though Gladstones himself put forward a paper in 1999 suggesting that, based on the differences in climate and soil, Margaret River could and should be divided into six discrete subregions: Wilyabrup, Wallecliffe, Yallingup, Caribunup, Treeton, and Karridale. There is interest among a number of wineries in moving to this, especially among those based in Wilyabrup, but most feel that the world, including the rest of Australia, needs to understand Margaret River better as a whole before dealing with the idiosyncrasies of subregions. Does anyone really believe that someone in London, New York, or San Francisco will select a wine on whether it is from Wilyabrup or Karridale? Subregions are likely to gain official recognition eventually, but not for a number of years.

Among those keen on official subregions is Vanya Cullen, and as anyone who has ever met Vanya knows, she has extraordinary drive and determination—look to the quality of her wines, if you doubt it. Her view is that the time is right, and that Gladstones's 1999 map—"an independent map of subregions by a world-recognized, independent scientist"—shows the best way forward. She argues that winemakers and



CULLEN'S INTERNATIONAL CHARDONNAY TASTING

Also held over the Gourmet Escape weekend in November, the annual Cullen's International Chardonnay Tasting is the white version of the Cape Mentelle event and has been going for nearly as long. It began as an attempt by Vanya's father, Kevin (another medico), to benchmark both his and the local Chardonnays. The crowd is smaller—I suspect that is merely a function of space, not interest—and the event follows pretty much the same format as Cape Mentelle but with Chardonnay, of course. Both tastings are completely blind.

The Chardonnays are given an extra year, so last year we were looking at the 2014s. There was a range of great examples from around the world, and again Margaret River was given the chance to shine. The lunch was provided by Tetsuya, perhaps Australia's most legendary chef, and he certainly lived up to that billing. Lunch wines tend to be more varied, since Vanya brings out magnums of her brilliant Diana Madeline Cabernet and others.

The 2018 event saw a slight variation on the usual theme. Instead of just a rollcall of the great Chardonnays from around the globe (after all, how many times do you really want to drink Coche-Dury), there was more of a focus on Margaret River, single-vineyard, and biodynamic wines. It threw up a few surprises and some truly magical gems.

There were a couple of white Burgundies, including a very fine Bernard Moreau Chevalier-Montrachet; one Chablis, Patrick Piuze Les Clos; Felton Road's Block 2; and non-Margaret River Aussies, Giaconda and Tolpuddle. The rest was from the west. The quality was mind-boggling, but for me, the wine of the day, and the most interesting, was Cullen's KJ Legacy Fruit Barrel (A\$250); there is also a Flower Barrel. Vanya made a barrel of several different wines, based on the varying days of the biodynamic calendar. A review from mid-2016 suggested that these wines were almost indistinguishable. But the extra two to three years have put paid to that—they were completely different. The Fruit Barrel was extraordinarily complex, offering a wonderfully seductive texture, great length, and the proverbial peacock's-tail array of flavors. I rated it 99, and it was my best Chardonnay of the year.

Those interested in attending either event can contact info@capementelle.com.au or pa@cullenwines.com.au

wine lovers do already refer to subregional differences in fruit and wines, seeing them as obvious. Vanya has been joined in a proposal to the Wine Australia GI committee by Moss Wood, Woodlands, Fraser Gallop, and Lenton Brae and continues to gather data to support the proposal. So, it's a case of "watch this space."

Vintages

People often joke about the region never having experienced a poor vintage, but it is not far from the truth. One needs to go back to 2006 for a vintage that was perhaps too cool to see the best of what Margaret River reds can offer, though the whites were stellar. Even now, some vehemently dismiss any suggestion that 2006 was lesser in any way. For me, it is perhaps the only vintage where green notes were present in reds to any extent.

Since then, it has really been a matter of degrees of excellence and varying styles. Even 2011, castigated across almost all of the country, was a success here. And as Vanya Cullen said of 2013, "Another great vintage. We acknowledge that the above heading will lead to us being accused of sounding increasingly like a well-worn and predictable record. It is absolutely true, however." What does vary is yield, with years like '12 and '13 disappointingly small, as were '14 and '15, 2016 replenished much-needed stocks.

As for more recent vintages, 2014 was a year of great power and potential; 2015, more suited to elegance and grace, though still powerful. 2016 may prove to be unmatched for the whites, but the reds are excellent as well. Initially, 2017 looked like it might prove a real challenge... But no, almost inevitably it was designated superb across the board. Vanya describes it as "a vintage of great quality and quantity." 2018? Some speak of it

Above: Vanya Cullen amid the biodynamically cultivated vines on her family estate. Opposite: Deep Woods winemaker Julian Langworthy with its owner John Fogarty.

Photography courtesy of Wine Australia

as the greatest the region has yet seen, a vintage offering "concentration, balance, and perfume." Deep Woods winemaker Julian Langworthy describes it as "ball-tearingly fantastic"; Cliff Royale at Flametree as "the best MR vintage ever." Clive Otto from Fraser Gallop, and previously Vasse Felix, describes it as the "most perfect" in his 30 years. No birds, no heat spikes, no rain, and everything in "perfect timing," meaning the vineyards could be left until the optimum moment for picking, 2019? At the time of writing, it is still very early days, but it appears to be a later, cooler year. The earliest reports talk of excellent quality. Now, there's a shocker.

Wineries and wines

There are, of course, far too many fine wineries, old and new, not to mention excellent wines, to provide anything like a comprehensive review of all of them—for that, Ray Jordan's excellent annual guide to West Australian wines is ideal. What I offer here is a mix of pioneers, rising stars, and some of Australia's most exciting wineries and wines.

Deep Woods was founded more than 30 years ago—first wines from 1990. It has been part of the Lakes Folly portfolio since 2005. Lakes Folly was Australia's first boutique winery, established in the Hunter Valley in 1963 by Sydney surgeon and author Dr Max Lake and subsequently purchased by the Fogarty family, with several other wineries.

In all honesty, Deep Woods appeared to potter along quite competently, without ever rattling too many cages, for

most of its history. The past five or six years have seen it transform into one of the most exciting wineries in the country. The difference? The arrival of Julian Langworthy in 2011 and the support of the Fogarty family, which, as Julian puts it, allowed him to get "some new toys." Julian came from Wynn's in Coonawarra via Knappstein in the Clare. Since then, the wines have rivaled the best from the region and pretty much anywhere else. Julian has won almost every "winemaker of the year" award going; the winery, equal honors.

Julian is a welcome mix of confidence, reality, and humility. The original Block 3 was planted in 1985, one of the earliest "close-planted" blocks in the district. A visionary leap of faith? No, says Julian, the owner at the time had x number of rootstocks and so much land. He just "jammed everything in." At 525ft (160m) above sea level, this is the highest vineyard in Margaret River. Julian's view: "Does it really matter?" Far more important is its position on the Cape and the airflow this provides. The alignment of rows is north to south, with the vineyard facing east. Julian believes that this best suits Cabernet in Margaret River. Block 3 has now been extended from 2ha to 7ha (from 5 to 17 acres).

The flagship is the Reserve Cabernet, which sells out within two to three weeks of release. The most popular is something of a surprise—the Harmony Rosé, a Shiraz/Tempranillo blend and super-cheap at just A\$15. Julian added the Tempranillo to give it a "wild strawberry" note and to "make it grow up." There is occasionally a drip of Malbec. The 2018 is a delightfully spicy



Photography courtesy of Wine Australia



number. Production has gone from 500 cases in 2010, to 15,000 cases now. There is a more serious Rosé, made largely from Tempranillo, with some Shiraz and Vermentino. Various single-vineyard Cabernets are held back for aging, among which the 2012 Yallingup would be my current pick.

Star wine...? If it might have been an idea to list a single stellar wine from each winery, I have failed miserably at the first hurdle. The Chardonnays have more bling than a would-be rapper. I would have been content to name the 2016 Reserve, until I tasted the even better 2017 (A\$60). It's easy to see why this wine cleaned up on the show circuit, winning golds in every show plus a series of trophies, including Best White in Adelaide. A mix of three vineyards from across the subregions, this is the wild child compared to 2016, the school prefect. (Think Penfolds Bin A compared to Yattarna.) Wonderfully complex and textural, bursting with flavor (97/100). This is A\$50. What does A\$50 get you in Burgundy?

Then there's the 2016 Reserve Cabernet (price has risen to A\$70). The 2014 brought the Jimmy Watson back to Margaret River and turned the spotlight onto this winery. Young, fresh, and vibrant, this is sheer quality, exhibiting the violets that come from Block 3. Cashmere tannins and so much length (also 97). Again, extraordinary value.

The Horgan family established Leeuwin Estate in 1973. Its international reputation, as one of the great wine producers of Australia, came on the back of the Art Series Chardonnay, but Horgan took things further, building an enviable gallery of Australian art, following the Mouton example, with artists providing work for labels. He was also one of the first to offer

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winery concerts. In typical Horgan fashion, he went straight to some of the largest acts in the world, and they have graced the stage of the estate for 34 years. Originally there were orchestras—the first, in 1985, was the London Philharmonic, followed by the Berlin and the Denmark. This morphed into superstars plus orchestras—Ray Charles, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, and many others: Diana Ross, Tom Jones, Bryn Terfel, Shirley Bassey, Julio Iglesias, Michael Crawford, Roberta Flack, James Taylor, Sting, Carole King, Jackson Browne...

Leeuwin remains committed to the Riesling (the “frog” wine, as it is often called, thanks to John Olsen's famous labels), which it has made since 1978, but it has always been the Art Series Chardonnay that has enthralled wine lovers. For many years, the reds lagged well behind, but over the past decade or two, a real effort has been made to elevate these to the same standard. I think it fair to say that they are probably not quite

there yet (which may simply be because the Chardy is so good), but they get closer every year and now sit comfortably with the region's finest.

Art Series Chardonnay is based on the unirrigated Block 20 vineyard, planted in the mid-'70s, which, as they suggest these days, needs little attention because “it does its own thing.” One hundred percent Gin Gin clones, giving the wines a fabulous opulence, the grapes are hand-harvested in the early morning and chilled to 36°F (2°C) under a gas cover for between six and eight hours. Since 2013, they have been experimenting with natural fermentation. There has been no malolactic fermentation for many years. The wine sees 100 percent French oak for the best part of a year. The 2015 vintage saw 30–40 percent *millerandage*, providing the requisite mix of acidity and sugars.

Over recent months, quite a few of these wines have crossed my palate. The 2005 had a wonderful lemon-butter, walnut character, the complexity that these wines achieve with age (that they age superbly has never been in question), and extraordinary length. The 2006 was just as good, more caramel and nuts but still the wonderfully supple texture. The 2010, all melon and lemon notes, a complete wine. From 2013, there was that opulent stone fruit and the promise of glories to follow. The 2014 was a delightful combination of power and delicacy, complexity and elegance. The 2015 had the disadvantage of extreme youth, but with tightness and concentration. There were floral, stone-fruit, and ginger aromas, backed by lacy acidity on the palate. In time, it will prove one of the best. The 2016 is, of course, even younger, but it may outshine them all over the coming years: stunning stuff, full of guava, lime, and lemon notes, white peaches and cashews, the oak evident but melding well. Bright acidity, impeccable balance, and such length. At around A\$120, it is, in international terms, still great value. I couldn't justify giving it any less than 99.

Put simply, if you asked Aussie wine lovers to name Margaret River's best winery, a significant majority would opt for Cullen. They might have varying reasons for doing so. Some would point to the work in biodynamics; others would see a collection of wines across the board; a few might look to the Kevin John Chardonnay, and yet others, myself included, to the astonishing consistency over so many vintages of their Diana Madeline Cabernet. That does not even touch on the amphora-aged, minuscule-production Vanya (A\$500), which I think is one of the most elegant reds yet made in this country.

The 2016 Diana Madeline (93 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 5 percent Merlot, 1 percent Malbec, 1 percent Petit Verdot) followed several vintages of negligible yields. Even with this bountiful harvest, it quickly sold out. This is a vintage offering more elegance and finesse than the muscular 2014 and powerful 2015. It spent 14 months in oak, 60 percent of which was new. Black-cherry, mild chocolate, and floral scents (notably violets), then gravelly tannins, but everything in ideal balance; yet another Diana Madeline destined for a long and happy life (97). The 2017 vintage (A\$135) is even better. With an utterly entrancing fragrance of dark fruits and a hint of graphite, violets, and chocolate, it has the finest silky tannins, great length, and near-perfect balance, and it is already exhibiting early complexity—such an exciting future (98).

Photography courtesy of (left) Wine Australia; (right) Margaret River Association

Opposite: Denis and Trish Horgan, with son Justin Horgan and Simone Horgan-Furlong. Above: The cellar door at Flametree Wines, offering “an array of finely crafted wines.”



Cape Mentelle is yet another regional star, not least for its pivotal early role and the annual International Cabernet event. Chardonnay and especially Cabernet are flag-bearers, but it also has a fine reputation for its Sem/Sauv blends and makes one of the region's curios, Zinfandel. For me, the Cabernet is usually the pick. The wines from the past decade have been especially good. But more and more, the Chardonnay is impressing. The 2017 (A\$49) is one of the best: real cashew notes here, oatmeal, minerals, and stone fruit; underlying power and fine balance. Like so many of the region's Chardonnays, it would benefit from decanting. The highlight of this wine is its amazing length—it feels like it will never stop (95).

The steady hand of Cliff Royale at Flametree ensures an array of finely crafted wines. They, too, enjoyed Jimmy Watson success, winning with their first wine, the 2007 Cabernet, still a superbly structured effort. In 2016, they made a straight Cabernet (usually some Merlot), and it is a cracker—classic Margaret River Cabernet and only A\$30. Blackberry, leather, and chocolate, with great length and a supple palate (96). At this stage, for me, it edges their premium SRS Cabernet from the same vintage.

Cloudburst Wines is a cult favorite, though with us for only just over a decade. An American, Will Berliner, purchased the land in 2004, not for vines but as the place he wanted to live, such was its beauty. Vines came quickly—the following year—and Will set out to make wines of exemplary quality from his half-hectare (1.2 acres), since doubled. There are three wines—a Chardonnay, a Cabernet Sauvignon, and a Malbec—obviously extremely limited in quantity. Prices sit around the A\$250 to A\$375 mark, making them some of the country's most expensive. I'm yet to be completely convinced by the Malbec, but there



is no question as to the quality of the Cabernet. And the Chardonnay transcends even that. The 2016 (A\$250) is magic, but if broaching it now, decant it or even keep it in the fridge for a day after opening. More and more emerges: complex, seamless, real intensity, and serious length. A creamy Chardonnay, with rockmelon and lovely smoky pear notes. I gave it 96 when I first tried it, then 97 the next day.

McHenry Hohnen has been with us now for 15 years. They like to focus on single vineyards, using biodynamic techniques. Quantities of some of the wines are very limited, which may be the reason they don't have a higher profile, but expect them to be revealed over the next decade as another regional star. My current pick is the Rolling Stone 2014 (A\$80), from Hazel's Vineyard. A blend of Cabernet, Malbec, Merlot, and Petit Verdot, it is well structured, with plenty of flesh to fill it out. A mix of cedary notes, with hints of chocolate and black fruits, then gravelly tannins and good length, it has a little more heft than many from the region (94).

Moss Wood is yet another of the early pioneers to attain cult status. Vines were first planted in the late 1960s by Bill Pannell, another of the region's medico winemakers. Keith Mugford has been there since the late '70s and has owned it since 1985. Some of the early wines still stun, but there was a perception some years ago that they were underachieving. Personally, I think that if there was a dip in quality, it was a minor one. These days, they are on song, and the wines are perhaps the best they have ever made. As well as the Estate wines, there is the

Above: McHenry Hohnen's Hazel's Vineyard, the source of its Rolling Stone blend. Opposite: Virginia Willcock, chief winemaker at Margaret River pioneer Vasse Felix.

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range from the Ribbon Vale vineyard and Amy's Vineyard. They have always made good use of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, the latter often appearing solo, and when the Chardonnay ventures into creamy, opulent territory, it is hard to beat. The 2017 (A\$85) was wonderfully textural, with rockmelon and cashew notes and noticeable oak melding well (96). They persist with Pinot Noir, though sometimes one wonders. Asked if they would plant Pinot Noir if starting over, the answer was an emphatic yes. All of those are but the entrée to the main course—the Estate Cabernet Sauvignon from the Wilyabrup subregion. The current release is the 2015, but the 2014 was the wine that again focused attention here, garnering some of the highest scores local critics have ever given anything. The 2015 (A\$130) is perhaps more structural, with cushiony yet gravelly tannins and great length—a wine that will age gracefully for decades (96). Better than '14? Different anyway, and, to me, more elegant, but try them both. The 2017 in barrel looked like another winner.



Photography courtesy of (left) Margaret River Association, (right) Wine Australia

Woodlands, with Stuart Watson at the helm, is a must-visit. Established in 1973, it is another winery situated in the dress circle of Wilyabrup, offering a range of brilliant wines, some of which I believe are available only to cellar-door visitors. I love the Chloe Chardonnay but for me, the reds are the main feature. The overall impression is of an ideal mix of power and elegance and of exemplary tannin management; wines that express their regionality and honor the vintage conditions. The 2015 Russell Cabernet (A\$150) includes a drop of Malbec and 1 percent Petit Verdot. The elegance from the 2015 vintage is evident here, and it works perfectly. Among the emerging perfumes are black fruits, flowers, leather, and hints of chocolate; the tannins are silky and the oak integration superb. A stellar future awaits. I gave it 97 and then started to worry that I seemed to have an awful lot of very high scores across the region, so I went off and compared them with those of several other critics. I was relieved, I think, to find out I was actually undercutting them on most occasions.

By any criterion one chooses, Vasse Felix is one of Margaret River's most important wineries. Starting in 1967, it was the pioneer, thanks to the work of yet another medico winemaker, Dr Tom Cullity. The wines have always been impressive, though it would be fair to say that they were sometimes overshadowed by neighbors. The Holmes a Court family then stepped in (and as every Australian could tell you, that means serious money). There were one or two curious staffing decisions, but what they got absolutely right was the appointment of Virginia Willcock as chief winemaker. She is among the elite, and the wines have reached hitherto unimagined heights. The range has expanded—Filius, Premium, and Prestige (Heytesbury for Chardonnay and Tom Cullity for

Cabernet). To select a favorite is like naming a preferred child. That said, "my child" would be the 2014 Tom Cullity Cabernet-Malbec (A\$180). There would be very few estates in Bordeaux not weeping with joy to have produced a wine as exquisite as this. Violets are immediately evident (Virginia believes a drop of Petit Verdot gives those), while the Malbec offers mulberries; seamless in structure, with cashmere tannins, Tolstoy-like length, and a knife-edge balance. A special wine (97). I should add that there is perhaps no better cellar-door experience in Margaret River than Vasse Felix. Everything is done superbly, and be sure to time your visit to coincide with lunch.

When visiting any region, it always pays to chat to locals—winemakers and regional sommeliers—who will share the occasional name that might not have hit the radar yet. More than one local mentioned the name of Cath Oates and her winery, Oates End. Cath has worked in wineries around the world and now heads the family operation. We couldn't coincide timing for a visit, but she kindly sent me a range of her wines—and it's easy to see why people are talking. Among the regional standards, she is also making a terrific Tempranillo, but if I had to pick one wine, it would be the 2014 Cabernet (A\$48): glorious aromas of dark berries, blackcurrants, spices, tobacco box, a hint of animal skins, and quality chocolate; good underlying acidity, silky yet slightly furry tannins, good balance and length (96). A terrific future here, and one can expect to hear much more of Oates Ends.

Mr Barval is another small producer in the region. The name comes from Margaret River (Mr), Barolo (Bar), and Valtellina (val), the three regions where winemaker Rob Gheradi has worked. And yes, he makes a Nebbiolo. The 2016

Riserva Cabernet Sauvignon was certainly impressive, as was the 2018 Chardonnay (A\$40, representing excellent value), with its slightly cinnamon oak, guava and grapefruit notes, and serious concentration (94). It gives a glimpse of the sheer quality of this much-hyped vintage. So, too, does the 100 percent Nebbiolo 2018 Nebbia (A\$35), from small parcels of fruit in Karridale and Yallingup, fermented with wild yeasts, the juice left on skins for six days, and then spending nine months in three-year-old French oak. No one will suggest that this is the greatest wine you'll find in Margaret River, but for sheer deliciousness it is hard to beat: floral aromas (rose petals), with confectionary notes, garden herbs, and redcurrants, fabulously decadent but fresh. The overriding impression is of a mix of red jellybeans and a hedonistic black-cherry mud cake (91). How could you not love that?

Wines from three more small producers deserve mention. The 2017 **Windows Estate** Chardonnay (A\$45) offered spices and smoky-bacon notes, with stone fruits and a minerally backing, opening up beautifully in the glass (92). The 2012 **Cape Grace Reserve Cabernet Museum Release** (A\$95) is also worth chasing: foresty notes (100 percent new oak), with black cherries, fine balance, and excellent persistence (94). This is the first Museum release, but 2013, 2014, and 2016 will follow. The 2014 **Brown Hill Perseverance Cabernet/Merlot** (A\$65), a 70/30 blend and barrel selection, offers coffee beans, dark chocolate, and black fruits on the nose; seamless and supple, with a delightful sweet core of dark berries, it will age well (96).

Another winery happily sweeping all before it is Jeff and Amy Burch's **Howard Park**. They have vineyards throughout Western Australia, there are some fine sparklers and they even dabble with Burgundy under the Marchand & Burch label, but Margaret River is the jewel in the crown and the site of their superb facilities. Janice McDonald, current Australian Winemaker of the Year, runs the show. Toss a coin here for a favorite. Today, it came down 2017 **Allingham Chardonnay** (A\$90), sourced from the finest parts of their Allingham vineyard in the Karridale subregion. A barrel selection (40 percent new oak), this is still very youthful but already showing signs of building complexity; there are matchstick and appealing, slightly funky notes on the nose, then great texture—a wine that lingers with intent (96).

Another of the early stars that has never missed a beat is Mike Peterkin's **Pierro**. It has expanded somewhat since my last visit but still has the feel of a boutique establishment, focusing on sheer quality. The developments are very much aimed at improving standards rather than making a wine Disneyland for visitors. Other regions will talk of the importance of older vines—not so easy in Margaret River, but Pierro has vines dating back 40 years. Their second line, **Fire Gully**, is a great place to look for cracking value from this region, but it is the Estate Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon that carry the flag. The 2014 **Cabernet Reserve** (A\$125) is all class. Red fruits (redcurrants above all) dominate on the nose, alongside cherries and spices; fine tannins, but as always, the structure is exemplary (94). Expect this to be a real improver over the coming years.

Devil's Lair was established in 1990 and is now part of Treasury Wine Estates, though that is hardly in evidence, other than as support. No cellar door here, but the wines are widely available. There are various levels, focusing on Chardonnay and Cabernet, with the ultra-premium Ninth Chamber the

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pinnacle. While the team might strive "to build generosity" with the Estate wines, the Ninth Chambers are far more reticent, more subtle. These are delicate, elegant wines, finely crafted with an eye to the long haul, so do not spend your money on these if you are after blockbusters or a quick bang for your buck. The Chardonnay was made in 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015 (the current release), and 2017. The 2015 has no new oak, is fragrant, ethereal, and so well balanced, with room to soar (96). As much as I love the Chardonnays, I think the Cabernets shine even more brightly. The 2016 Estate Cabernet is fabulous, but the 2013 Ninth Chamber Cabernet (the second release after the initial 2011, A\$120) is a Margaret River classic. The 2017, released in a few years, will be one to chase. The proportion of new oak has been reduced from 100 to 50 percent. A glorious mix of black fruits, leather, and beef stock, it is alluringly fragrant, offering finesse and poise; with gravelly yet unobtrusive tannins, it's a seamless wine that might just be the best ever made here (98).

The cellar door at **Voyager Estate** is one of the most impressive in the country: a must-visit (and don't miss the restaurant). This is yet another stellar Margaret River winery doing everything it can to ensure gradual but ever-increasing improvements in their wines. Steve James and Travis Lemm have spent years honing their craft and producing superb wines. You could look to the excellent-value, larger-volume wines (the **Girt by Sea Cab/Merlot** is consistently worthwhile) or try some of their experimental efforts with single vineyards. Given the choice, though, I'd opt for the 2014 Estate Cabernet (A\$85). Mostly from their North Block, it is 90 percent Cabernet, with Merlot and Petit Verdot combining for the remainder. A complete and complex wine with exquisite floral aromas, this also oozes blueberry notes. A wine with a massive future (98).

At the risk of sounding like the proverbial broken record, **Xanadu** is yet another quality Margaret River winery making, under the guidance of Glenn Goodall, better wines than ever. Xanadu is part of the Rathbone wineries, along with Mt Langi Ghiran, Yarrabank, and Yering Station. As usual, Cabernet and Chardonnay are the stars. There is a range of single-vineyard wines, which largely focus on the highly regarded Steven's Road vineyard, originally planted by John Brocksope, the man behind the famous Block 20 (used for Leeuwin Chardonnay), which is across the road. And yes, Xanadu has also picked up a Jimmy Watson Trophy, winning in 2018 with its 2016 Cabernet. The Cabernets can sit with any from the district (as can the Chardonnays). There is an Estate and a Reserve in some

Opposite: Xanadu senior winemaker Glenn Goodall (right) and winemaker Brendan Carr, who helped win it the 2018 Jimmy Watson Trophy for its 2016 Cabernet.



Photography by Jessica Wildt, courtesy of Margaret River Association

years—2014, for example—but no 2015 or 2016. Prices sit at around A\$60 and A\$100 respectively; the 2015 Steven's Road Cabernet is A\$75. The 2014 Reserve Cabernet is superb, but one wonders how much the decision not to produce a Reserve in 2016 elevated the quality of the Estate, allowing it to win the Jimmy. The 2016 Cabernet, to be released mid-2019, saw 40 percent new oak. Usually, it would be dominated by Wilyabrup fruit, but on this occasion it's 75 percent Wallcliffe, which Glenn believes contributes extra elegance. The wine is concentrated and seamless, with plush tannins and great balance and length; the aromas and flavors include black cherry, tobacco box, soy, meaty notes, and chocolate (97).

Margaret River has, to date, not really enticed the mega-producers to flood in and buy up. Some exceptions. Treasury with **Devil's Lair** is one; some of the top **Accolade Wines** are based on Margaret River fruit/vineyards; and the very successful **Robert Oatley Wines** makes wines from various regions, using local superstar winemaker Larry Cherubino. They have now established a significant presence. Among their wines, the 2014 **Finisterre Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon** (A\$40) is exceptional. Very dark in color, this is richly flavored, with blackberries, cloves, dark chocolate, dark plums, and coffee grinds, having great persistence; firm, well-structured tannins, but still youthful (94). The 2017 Margaret River Cabernet is one of Australia's great bargains at under A\$20 (the discounted price): no shrinking violet, with deep, bold flavors of black fruits, dried herbs, and cassis; ridiculously good value (92). The 2016 **Finisterre Margaret River Chardonnay**

(A\$37) is another fine wine, with oatmeal, nuts, guava, and stone fruits; quite minerally under that, with good length (93).

When it comes to **Fraser Gallop**, one of the matters that always arises for discussion is value. Not that it makes Nigel Gallop happy—he'd rather just focus on quality. It is not easy to escape, though, when you have a series of cracking wines drinking well above their prices. In deference to Nigel, we will not mention value again. Winemaker Clive Otto has been there since 2006, after a long stint with Vasse Felix, beginning in 1989. The range encompasses Estate wines, **Parterre**, and finally a series called **Palladian**, which will sit at the top (and finally be priced somewhere near what the wines deserve). I was blown away by the quality of the 2017 **Palladian Chardonnay**, but the 2015 **Palladian Cabernet Sauvignon** (A\$110) might be even better (and a barrel tasting of the 2018 suggests it will be among the greatest wines this region has ever made). It was cold-soaked for ten days at 46°F (8°C), fermented with 100 percent indigenous yeast, and spent 40 days on skins. Aromas and flavors roam through spices, tobacco leaves, coffee grinds, truffley notes, cherries, blueberries, and dried herbs; beautifully balanced, supple and seamless, with at least 20 years of joy ahead of it. Bended-knee stuff (98).

The bottom line is that this is not only one of the most spectacularly beautiful wine regions—do visit if at all possible—it is also making stunning wines, especially Chardonnay and Cabernet, usually at embarrassingly low prices in international terms. If you are not buying, cellaring, and drinking wines from Margaret River, you are doing yourself a disservice. ■