



Rebels with a cause

Boutique wineries are changing the game for Australian wine.

LOWER ALCOHOL, higher acidity, gentler savoury flavours and more textural qualities – these are the attributes of new wines that are making international critics pay fresh attention to this state's vinous output, breaking the mould of Australian wine perceptions in a very positive way.

It has come as a result of gentle rebellion – mostly boutique-scale winemaker ventures that share a common mantra of picking grapes earlier to ensure greater natural acidity. A notion that echoes Peter Lehmann's great wines made at Saltram Winery during the 1960s and 1970s – wines that still looked remarkably fresh and vibrant at 2012's retrospective tasting of 50 vintages of Mamre Brook and Metala wines. It's a template being revived with impressive results and will have great influence and impact on more local wineries in coming vintages.



Winemakers at large: Alex Head (left); Abel Gibson (far left) and; Taras Ochota (below).



Cool ways with wine

Alex Head has a vision to work with Rhone grape varieties that are famous in the Barossa – shiraz, grenache, mourvedre, viognier – but deliberately makes them in the style of cool climate wines to highlight leaner, more savoury flavours. The former Sydney wine merchant, who works out of Damien Tscharke's Barossa winery during vintage, has created Head Wines and is building his brand and reputation on a series of single-vineyard expressions to highlight Barossa's sub-regional differences, yet he doesn't own a winery, or vineyards. "I want all my resources to go into making the best wine I can," says Alex. "That means building relationships with great vineyard owners, taking the time to pick grapes at exactly the right moment, being patient in the winery to get the results I want. That's a costly exercise but when I look at the wines in bottle, I say it's a worthwhile investment."

Sum of many parts

Abel Gibson started Ruggabellus wines to create a very different type of Barossa wine – lighter, leaner, sinuous and seductive, speaking more of the bony soils than plump sunny fruit. He picks grapes early from a small network of local vineyards, works according to biodynamic lunar cycles, and has a notable absence of new oak in his wines. "I've arrived at a style of wines I like to drink, and it seems there's a lot of others who also like this interesting, more nuanced structure in their wines as well," says Abel. While his wines represent a fresh take on Barossa red wines, his philosophy is the sum of many parts, learned from the wise winemakers he has worked with. His four reds, all vintage blends of shiraz, grenache and mataro in varying proportions, are now in big demand and hard to obtain, but try them in smart restaurants, such as FermentAsian in Tanunda.

Understated and surprising

Taras Ochota takes a natural approach to minimal intervention winemaking and focuses on grenache, syrah, pinot noir and chardonnay in his Ochota Barrels wine brand. The flavours are rich and crisp, complex and beguiling. "I want wines that are delicious, understated, surprising. They should tantalise your mouth, not overwhelm your palate," says Taras. "I want to go back for another glass and enjoy it just as much the second time." He's part of a fraternity of likeminded winemakers based in the Hills, including James Erskine (Jauma Wines). The varieties that excite them include grenache and chenin blanc – unfashionable for so long, yet now being embraced to create distinctive new interpretations. Although hard to find in bottle shops, these are the wines you'll taste in the sharp new small bars of Adelaide, such as Clever Little Tailor, Cork Wine Cafe or Proof.