

ORGANIC GROWTH

South Australia's first wine region, McLaren Vale has grown to be one of the country's finest, elevated through a culture of respect and cooperation, and the locals' innovative and thoughtful attitude to wine production.

WORDS BY KATE SYMONS



Like many kids his age, Eli has a favourite word. Unlike many kids his age, Eli's favourite word has more than one syllable.

"Do you know what my favourite word is?" the chatty six-year-old asks me, as if I have every chance of guessing. When I tell him I don't, but that I would very much love to know, he responds with adorable gusto ... and a decent attempt at an Italian accent: "Montepulciano!"

It's quite a mouthful, but not a surprising choice when you understand Eli's surrounds. Our conversation – and, despite his youth, it is a conversation – takes place among the vines at Hither & Yon, the McLaren Vale estate owned and run by Eli's dad and uncle, brothers Malcolm and Richard Leask. The property doubles as the site of Eli's family home and is a veritable playground for the young adventurer and his big brother, Abel.

"My wife and I, and most of our friends, are involved in our own [wine] brands," explains Malcolm. "Our social life revolves around, you know, going to wineries and breweries, and having the kids run around and stuff, so it's all around them."

Sounds idyllic. And it's a pretty fair reflection of McLaren Vale on the whole. Located just 40 minutes from central Adelaide, McLaren Vale is not only home to world-class wines, it is also home to some of the country's most innovative wine people. Thankfully, they are also some of the most generous, demonstrating a genuine enthusiasm for sharing their time, their knowledge and their spoils.

Malcolm is a perfect example. He is Hither & Yon's 'inside guy', responsible for creative direction of the brand and, in this instance, hosting a visiting journalist. We meet at the label's high street cellar door in Willunga, a charm-filled space that almost insists you settle in for a lazy afternoon tittle. Out the back, we collect our cruiser bikes and set off on McLaren Vale's 8km Shiraz Trail.

GRAPE VARIETIES

Shiraz is the region's leading grape, accounting for 59 per cent of the 2020 crush, according to Wine Australia. Yet other varieties are also now nudging their way into the spotlight. Grenache, in particular, is taking hold, while montepulciano is another up-and-comer. Perhaps it's Eli's



Clockwise, from top: The d'Arenberg Cube; Jock Harvey, director of viticulture at Chalk Hill Wines; Port Willunga Caves; Richard (left) and Malcolm Leask of Hither & Yon.

marketing efforts. More likely, it is the unmistakable drinkability. Montepulciano is one of four new varieties for Hither & Yon. The others? Fiano, vermintino and greco (di tufo). All are Italian, making them a good match for McLaren Vale's Mediterranean climate and geology.

The Leasks planted 'Monty' in the spring of 2018, and the first pick took place earlier this year, with help from Eli and Abel. When embarking on new projects, Malcolm says the collective knowledge of his contemporaries comes to the fore.



PHOTOGRAPHY: DUY DASH; REXVIL-PHOTOGRAPHY; MEAGHAN COLES; DECLAN HARTLEY-BROWN; SOUTH AUSTRALIAN TOURISM COMMISSION/JOSIE WITHERS

"THE CHARM-FILLED CELLAR DOOR ALMOST INSISTS YOU SETTLE IN FOR A LAZY AFTERNOON TITTLE."

"Montepulciano is a pretty classic variety, but everyone we've spoken to about it is really excited about it," he says. "It's another medium-body, slightly savoury, delicious, easy-drinking, food-friendly red. We pay respect to other people in the region that have been growing it longer than us. We're seeing some really great styles of montepulciano in the region. With new variety development, we do tend to look at our peers and lean on each other for education and learning about how [the variety] responds to different practices."

ONE FOR ALL

Malcolm isn't the only local to highlight McLaren Vale's collegiate culture – there are examples of this attitude peppered throughout the

region. The Chalk Hill Wines cellar door is one. The slick new venue is a collaboration with Never Never Distilling Co and Cucina di Strada, delivering premium small-batch wines, award-winning gin and 'delizioso' Italian fare on one spectacular site.

Jock Harvey, director of viticulture at Chalk Hill Wines, is also co-founder of Biodiversity McLaren Vale (BMV), an initiative that relies heavily on local support. Among other projects, Biodiversity McLaren Vale runs monthly field days, during which volunteers come together to help clear and restore the region's degraded creek lines.

Jock is modest about his efforts, but they are considerable. His role with BMV is voluntary, driven by a passion for future-proofing the region, and he is also chair of the McLaren Vale Community Sustainability Company. He was heavily involved in launching the Homeless Involves Project, a charitable initiative bolstering homelessness support services, and still takes part each year. This list is not exhaustive, but Jock is quick to point out that he's not alone, with "cooperation and supporting others [being] one of the great traits of this region." Why so?

MEET THE WINEMAKERS

PAUL WILSON

Paul Wilson is what you might call a late bloomer. Owner and winemaker at boutique winery Samson Tall, the 51-year-old has a "midlife crisis" to thank for his burgeoning new career. After years in the high-flying, suit-wearing business of drinks marketing, Paul decided on a detour. At 38, he dropped the expat life, returning to Australia from Hong Kong with a new plan.

"I had always been in contact with winemakers during that [previous] work life and came to the conclusion that they were much happier than I was," he laughs. "Basically, it was a midlife crisis and instead of buying a sports car I went back to uni."

Specifically, he studied wine science part-time with Charles Stuart University. At the same time, he took on a cellar hand role at Wirra Wirra, a move that would prove fateful. On his first day on the job, he met and fell in love with the estate's then events manager, Heather Budich. The two have been a couple ever since and although they've never married, they did go ahead and buy a church.

Built in 1854, the old Bethany Chapel is now home to Samson Tall, Paul and Heather's picturesque winery and cellar door. Previously a bed and breakfast, the property would catch Paul's eye every time he visited Heather's parents' place and the couple soon began fantasising about transforming it into a cellar door. So, once a year for the following eight years, Paul and Heather wrote a letter to the owners asking them to sell.

"In the ninth year, they sold us the church. We were very, very lucky. They preferentially sold to us. There were other people that were interested, but [the previous owners] felt that we would love it as much as they had."

Paul started making wine under the Samson Tall label in 2016. The current site opened two years later. With its sun-dappled verandah, lush lawn and sweeping vineyard views, it has quickly become a must-visit destination for both locals and visitors to the region. Paul and Heather's relaxed approach, as well as their fruit-driven, easy-drinking wines, strengthen the appeal.



"I know it's a cliché, but we're really sort of letting the vineyard and the grapes do the talking and letting the winemaking be in the background," says Paul. "There are a lot of adjectives surrounding winemaking that you can use and make it all sound really fancy ... but we just pick the grapes and we've got a way we make the wine and it just turns out how it turns out. We're just trying to show the year that was." samsontall.com.au

“McLaren Vale came from a long way behind the [nearby] Barossa [Valley wine region] in terms of not just reputation, but also government funding and so it was the attitude of, ‘Hang on, let’s just do it ourselves,’” explains Jock. “That cooperation has become a cultural thing that people want to protect as well.”

While Jock is busy poisoning olive trees (don’t worry, only the wild kind), Sam Temme is busy tending to them, part of his role as general manager at Lloyd Brothers. Here, the evergreen plants have an entirely different standing to those clogging local creek lines. They are, after all, growing where they belong – in an olive grove. Although olives comprise only “about 10 per cent” of the estate’s turnover, they will always be an important part of the Lloyd Brothers story. “[The olives are] an awesome point of difference,” Sam says. “It’s something we’re really passionate about and it’s a nod to the history of the property and McLaren Vale in general.”

Of Lloyd Brothers’ 1,000 olive trees, most are kalamata that are hand-picked, traditionally brined and sold through the cellar door and online. The verdale trees are earmarked for extra-virgin olive oil. Meanwhile, the estate’s GSM (a wine blend of grenache, shiraz and mourvèdre) is a lip-smacker, and I am

“THE SPECTACULAR D’ARENBERG CUBE HAS BECOME THE MCLAREN VALE HOTSPOT.”

lucky enough to enjoy a glass over lunch at one of McLaren Vale’s most renowned eateries, Star of Greece.

Don’t let the name fool you. This waterfront gem in Port Willunga doesn’t trade in Greek food, although there is a distinct Mediterranean influence. Rather, Star of Greece is named for a ship that sunk in the very waters it overlooks in 1888, and fresh, local produce is the hero.

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

Another local hero, especially when talk turns to tourism, is Chester Osborn, chief winemaker at d’Arenberg, mastermind behind the famous d’Arenberg Cube, and about as colourful a character as you’re likely to meet. His wardrobe alone is testament to that. With a vision to break the cellar-door mould, Chester dreamed up the Rubik’s Cube-inspired building 18 years ago: “I built a model and



capable hands of her parents, Paul and Jill Buttery, and has since been transformed under her leadership.

After attending a health retreat on Kangaroo Island in 2004, it occurred to Melissa that her personal philosophies didn’t match up with what was happening at work. Subsequently, with the (albeit hesitant) blessing of her parents, she converted Gemtree’s operations from conventional to organic and biodynamic. She has also developed the Gemtree Eco Trail, which involved planting thousands of native trees and shrubs on what was once barren land, while Gemtree’s Biodynamic Hut offers a step-by-step look at the process, helping visitors get a deeper understanding of the oft-misunderstood method. It’s quite the shift considering Melissa “didn’t have a sustainable bone in her body” before joining the family business in 1994. At least that’s according to her husband, Mike, who also happens to be Gemtree’s chief winemaker. By 2007, Gemtree’s biodynamics processes had rolled out. By 2011, Gemtree had earned full organic certification.

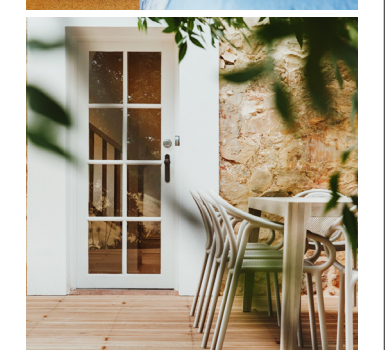
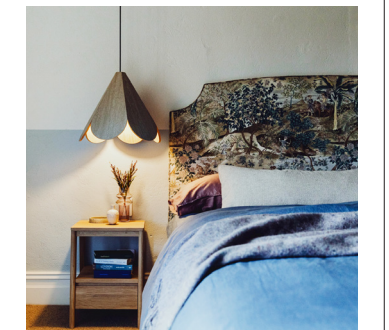
The region’s star varieties, such as shiraz, grenache and cabernet sauvignon, have their place at Gemtree, as do varieties expected to better withstand rising temperatures – think mataro, nero d’avola and fiano. The biodynamic practices have led to more vibrant wines, and a whole lot of good karma, one would think. With custodians like these, South Australia’s first wine region might just last the longest, too.

VISIT MINDFOOD.COM

A study examining the relationship between specific foods and later-in-life cognitive acuity has found that wine and cheese are protective against age-related cognitive problems. mindfood.com/wine-cheese-sharp-brain

WHERE TO STAY

Despite its tourism credentials, McLaren Vale is a little light on hotel options. Watch this space though, because Wirra Wirra has an exciting project in the pipeline. Plans are approved for a high-end, 22-room resort to be delivered in partnership with Adelaide-based property development company, Greaton. The resort is slated for a 2023 launch. In the meantime, luxury can be found via numerous bed-and-breakfast style stays, or cottage and homestead retreats. Our pick? The Coach House at Hillenvale, a spacious and beautifully designed one-bedroom cottage with every last detail stylishly considered. hillenvale.com



TOP DROPS FROM MCLAREN VALE

With over 160 vineyards dotted throughout the region, McLaren Vale has literally hundreds of delicious, world-class wines to tempt your palate, many of them award winners. Here is a selection of sensational drops to excite your interest.



2018 Yangarra Estate Shiraz

A distinctive Yangarra shiraz, with great concentration of flavour, fine supple tannins and great balance. Dark fruits with a hint of chocolate showcase the characters of the estate’s unique site.



2020 Hither & Yon Carignan

Tightly packed nose of wild forest berries and raspberries, with dark herbal notes, char and black spices. The palate is racy but with an appealing wildness, a kick of mulberries through to a zippy and flavourful finish.



2019 Gemtree Ernest Allan Shiraz

Complex and intense aromatics, with blackberry, cinnamon, cherry liqueur and creamy oak nuances. Mulberry and red berry fruits overlay a deeply textured, full-bodied palate.



2019 Lloyd Brothers McLaren Vale GSM

Grenache (65%) displays lovely juicy red and blue fruits, while the shiraz (32%) is a strong match with bright red fruit and a hint of dark chocolate. Three per cent mourvèdre adds some spice and lift.



2019 Wirra Wirra Farmer’s Heart Grenache

Vibrant and voluptuous, bright flavours are layered with polished sandy tannins, and succulent red fruits are followed by sweet spices and crunchy red plums.



2019 Chalk Hill Alpha Crucis Syrah

A vibrant, perfumed wine, showing lifted red and blue fruits, with floral notes. A well-balanced palate with red currant and blueberry fruits, plus cacao notes, layers of spice and French vanilla. Harmonious, with lingering tannins.



2020 d’Arenberg The Innocent Weed GSM

Juicy and generous, with red fruits the forerunners at this stage. Fresh raspberries and cherry liqueur on the nose, pomegranate and rhubarb on the palate, this wine is classic and organic.

presented it to the board and they told me I was crazy, that it’d never happen. But eventually I managed to talk them into it.” Since opening in 2017, the spectacular site has been the McLaren Vale hotspot. The five-storey building comprises a tasting room, bar, restaurant, and event spaces, as well as the Alternative Realities Museum, an utterly quirky, entirely absorbing collection of Chester’s own creations. Right now, you can also catch the Salvador Dalí exhibition.

Like many winemakers in the region, Chester is dedicated to organic and biodynamic practices. Meanwhile, all d’Arenberg wines are basket pressed, while all red ferments are foot trod mid-way through fermentation. Just 10 kilometres east, another progressive wine mind is making impactful decisions on a plot of land called Gemtree.

Third-generation viticulturist Melissa Brown is co-owner of Gemtree Wines, a business that started in the

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Chester Osborn of d’Arenberg; Biodynamic preparations at Gemtree; Olives from Lloyd Brothers; Melissa and Mike Brown of Gemtree; Lunch with a view at Star of Greece.