

**A HISTORY OF THE MARGARET RIVER WINE REGION, WITH  
PARTICULAR EMPHASIS ON CHARDONNAY AND CABERNET  
SAUVIGNON.**

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The Margaret River wine region was established on the advice presented in a report in 1965 by the eminent Western Australian agronomist Dr John Gladstones, in which he suggested that the Mediterranean maritime climate of the region would be particularly well suited to growing Cabernet Sauvignon. Prior to that time, early settlers, such as the Dawsons in 1848, the Leymans in 1868 and Italian immigrants in the early 1900s were making wine for themselves in the region.

The designated Margaret River wine region, which extends westwards from longitude 115°18' E, comprises the tip of the peninsula that represents the south west corner of Australia. It is the most isolated wine-producing region in the world and arguably the purest, with wind and rain travelling 1000s of kilometres across the Indian Ocean before arriving in Margaret River. The region is relatively large, extending 110 km from north to south and 27 km from east to west and, in a relatively short time, has become one of Australia's premium wine-producing regions.

John Gladstones stated in his 1965 report of the Margaret River area,

“I believe that the climate in the area could be uniquely suited for the production of wine grapes of the highest quality, and further that suitable soils exist. All known theoretical considerations point to a very good potential indeed.”

The Margaret River region has an ideal climate for growing grapes, due to its location in an area that has relatively high rainfall in winter and warm, dry weather in summer. The forecasts for the effects of climate change are encouraging for Margaret River because this region is located close to the coast and is thus buffered by the beneficial influence of the Indian Ocean.

The incidence of frost, cloud, rain and hail during the ripening period is low and the moderating effect of the Indian and Southern Oceans produces a predictable and stable climate.

### ***Sub-region***

The relatively large Margaret River region contains several distinct micro-climates and soil variations. In 1999, Dr John Gladstones thus proposed the recognition of sub-regions, based largely on the drainage systems and the effect of wind from the maritime environment which are reflected in a change in wine styles as one moves from Cape Naturaliste in the north to Cape Leeuwin at the most southern tip. Naturally, other factors also play a role here, including viticultural and winemaking techniques and topographical location. Yet, it is possible to distinguish between wines made in Wilyabrup in the middle of the Margaret River region, where Cullen Wines are located, and those produced further south.

While soil types in the Margaret River region vary, they basically comprise a gravelly loam top soil over a clay sub-soil in those areas that are most suitable for growing vines, and particularly those of Cabernet Sauvignon. Ancient granite bedrock and outcrops of limestone have been broken down to produce pockets of soil that are well suited to premium grape cultivation. The presence of tall red gum trees in an area of this region indicates that it is suitable for viticulture.

The first commercial vines in the Margaret River region were planted in 1967 at Dr Tom Cullity's Vasse Felix Vineyard. The original wine pioneers were, however, Diana and Kevin Cullen, who owned a property abutting Vasse Felix and on which they had planted an experimental acre of vines in the previous year. From these small beginnings, the region has continued to grow, with 36,601 tonnes (48% red and 52% white) being crushed during the 2008 vintage. That crush comprised 6,623 tonnes of Cabernet Sauvignon and 5,360 tonnes of Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Shiraz and Merlot collectively. Some Petit Verdot and Malbec, which have been planted in recent years, are also now harvested each year.

Due to the isolation produced by the tyranny of distance, Margaret River has danced to the beat of its own drum to a greater extent than the rest of the Australian wine industry. One of the first regions to be planted on the inspiration of a scientific study, it joined the 1960s wine boom in Australia. This was a red wine boom, built on the efforts of inspired "renaissance fine wine men", who used the vestigial 50-100 year old vineyards of the pioneers to create tiny quantities of the finest wines Australia has known. Three great men, Colin Preece, Max Schubert, Maurice O'Shea, blended Shiraz from traditional regions across Australia to create wines of true hedonic quality, which owed their attributes to the influence of the diverse and "distinguished sites" on which the grapes had been grown. This tradition of cross blending wines

from different regions of Australian led to wines being regarded as “wine makers’ wines” rather than as “wines of terroir” (Brian Croser 2009 Landmark tutorial).

### ***Where does Margaret River fit with the rest of the Australian wine industry?***

Margaret River was created by three inspired pioneers, all of whom were doctors and passionately wanted to make “wines of terroir.” At a time when most of Australia was following the renaissance model of cross regional blending, Dr Cullen, Dr Cullity and Dr Pannell established their own appellation scheme in order to protect the Margaret River wines from cross regional blending. Dr Cullity felt that

“Should a wine bear the label of the district then the wine bottle must contain only wine from that district.”

The doctors, one of whom was my father, wanted to make the best quality wine in the world and to place Margaret River on the world stage as a great region for wine. At a time when irrigation was widely employed across Australia, it was taking a long time for the vineyards to become established and for the vines to put down their roots. At Cullen vineyards, it took eight years before we were able to produce a reasonable crop.

### ***The 1990s***

The strong regional influence and the cultural and philosophical approaches of the pioneers of Margaret River resulted in the production of wines that typified the Margaret River region. The wines are not made in a “Parker style”, as always being elegant and reflecting the characteristics of the land on which the grapes had been grown.

As previously pointed out, Margaret River's history has not closely matched that of Australia's wine industry. At most levels, it has been driven by small, family-owned producers, who care for the environment and search for a sense of terroir in the bottle.

There have been three waves of growth in the region. The pioneers started in the late 1960s. In the early 1970s, these passionate wine men only wanted to make great wine and in particular Cabernet Sauvignon for which the region was considered by Dr Gladstones to be particularly suitable.

The second wave was in the late 1970s early 1980s, with the introduction of some more passionate producers and also a sense of grape growing for commercial purposes. At this time, there was an alteration in the social and economic outlook in the area. The early days of poverty and an absence of jobs, roads, schools and hospitals changed as wine production led to the introduction of cheese makers, restaurants, tourists and, best of all, a sense of optimism and jobs for the young.

The 1990s was the investment era, when 100% tax deduction for planting vineyards meant that two streams of winegrowers emerged in the region. There were those who were planting vineyards because they were passionate about making great wine and others who were planting to reduce their tax and to provide an investment. This talk focuses on the passionate small and family producers who have single site vineyards and have established a reputation for quality over a number of years.

The major styles and varieties that have had great success in Margaret River are the Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon blends, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, which is blended with Merlot, Petit Verdot, Malbec and Cabernet Franc. My talk focuses on Cabernet Sauvignon (and the blends that contain that variety) and Chardonnay as these are the flagship wines for which Margaret River is known.

I would like to thank the vignerons from the following wineries who generously gave their time to discuss this project with me; Pierro, Lenton Brae, Woodlands and Moss Wood in Wilyabrup and Voyager Estate and Leeuwin Estate in the Wallcliffe subregion.

### ***Chardonnay in Margaret River***

Here is a general overview from the producers. Chardonnay was first planted in the Margaret River region in 1976, namely 33 years ago. A total of 5,360 tonnes of Chardonnay grapes was crushed in the 2008 vintage, most or all of which had been grown on vines representing the Gin Gin or Mendosa clone, which produces the best Chardonnay fruit in the region. Other clones which have been trialed are the Dijon or Bernard clones 95, 96, 76, 277, which are higher yielding and are appreciated for adding freshness and softness to the wine. Clones, called 1, 3 and 5, are planted in small quantities, but are not considered to be of high quality, and Penfolds 58 is also planted but not widely used. The Gin Gin clone or Mendosa exhibits nearly 100% millerendage, providing a high skin to juice ratio and thus a good depth and concentration of flavour. The fact that it generally yields less than 5 tonnes per hectare helps account for the great depth and concentration of fruit that characterizes the Chardonnays produced in Margaret River.

All vines are planted on their own roots. The fruit flavours of Chardonnay in the north of Margaret River have citrus, nectarine, white peach and grapefruit characteristics. In contrast, the Chardonnays from the southern part of the Margaret River region, of which that of Leeuwin Estate is a particularly good example, have highly distinctive and dried pear, grapefruit and stone fruit characters.

The soil on which the best Chardonnays are grown is the Forest Grove type, comprising laterite, granite rock in sand in the top meter, overlying a laterite sub soil and then clay. Most of the vineyards are not irrigated and, if they are irrigated, that is only done to supplement existing water supplies during the growing season. The vines are thus encouraged to put their tap roots down into the clay to obtain water. All vines are arranged on a vertical, shoot-positioned trellis, cane pruned and widely spaced at about 3.5 by 1.5 metres. The one exception to this spacing is found at Pierro where the plantings are closer, at about 1.75 by 1 metre.

Most vineyards are attempting to reduce their dependence on chemicals for herbicides and pesticides and are using spot spraying with systemics if needed. The cover crops are a mixture of cloves and grasses, with underwire slashing of grass being preferred in most instances to the application of herbicides under the vines.

Nutrition is supplemented with compost and mineral rock, foliar sprays of kelp, seaweed and fish emulsion. The main disease is powdery mildew, which is controlled by sulphur sprays, while downy mildew is treated with copper. *Botrytis* sprays are used when necessary. *Botrytis* can pose a problem as storms can damage the bunches of the early flowering Chardonnay and this is manifested as *Botrytis* in the berry. Most vignerons prefer to have some cover for the Chardonnay berries as direct sun on the thin-skinned berries can lead to an increase in the level of phenolics in the juice.

Most wines are whole bunch pressed and harvested when they reach a ripeness that the winemaker regards as optimum. In many cases, malolactic fermentation does not occur, with winemakers preferring to retain acidity and to build complexity through lees stirring and oak maturation. There is a small amount of natural yeast fermentation and, apart from with one producer, the wines do not undergo natural

malolactic fermentation. All producers barrel ferment all of their Chardonnay in French oak, of which the amount that is new ranges from 30 to 100%. The wine spends from five to 12 months in oak and the wine is released after it has been in bottle for between three months and two years. All producers use screw caps for their Chardonnay and thus none use cork closure for this variety.

### ***Cabernet Sauvignon in Margaret River***

Cabernet Sauvignon was first planted in Margaret River in 1966 and the first commercial planting of this variety was in 1967 at Vasse Felix. By 2008, the harvest was yielding a crush of 6,623 tonnes of Cabernet Sauvignon and 4,139 tonnes of Merlot (first planted in 1976).

The clones planted throughout the Margaret River region are called the Houghton clones, which came from South Africa but were originally from Bordeaux. The blend ranges from 60 to 92% Cabernet Sauvignon, together with varying quantities of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec. There is a great deal of evidence that Petit Verdot grows very well and consistently ripens in Margaret River. This is similar to the situation with Cabernet Sauvignon, where it is easy to see that this variety is at home in the Mediterranean climate of Margaret River.

Most producers describe their Cabernet blend as single vineyard. The characters of Cabernet Sauvignon in the north are blackcurrant, mulberry, ironstone (derived perhaps from the ironstone soils of the forest grove), while those from the south show more blueberry, sage and cooler and more savory flavours.

Wine makers generally consider tannin quality as a good indicator of potential wine quality in the unharvested grape. All vineyards are planted on the forest grove soils and exposure of the fruit to sunlight prior to veraison is seen as critical for

producing high quality tannins. This is achieved by using either the Scott Henry trellis system or by leaf removal.

Cabernet Sauvignon vines need to be managed in the vineyard for them to produce ripe tannins. In addition to exposure to sunlight, the production of an appropriate crop level is critical for achieving the optimal ripeness of tannins and flavour. For this reason, most people cane prune and do not irrigate their Cabernet Sauvignon vines, which thus results in yields of only 5-6 tonnes per hectare for their top quality wines.

Wine makers in this region use a combination of whole berries and crushed fruit from 100% de-stemmed fruit. A combination of static and open fermentations is employed with skin contact lasting for 10 to 30 days. All but one vigneron inoculate to produce the primary and malolactic fermentations. The wine is matured in oak for 15 to 24 months, during which period it is subjected to three to four rackings. The amount of new oak employed ranges from 30 to 100%. The wine is subjected to minimal filtration and spends 12 months to two years in bottle prior to release. Screw cap is the closure of choice of all producers.

### ***Soil health is crucial for achieving wine quality and sustainability***

As discussed, the soils in Margaret River are very old and most vignerons use methods for sustaining the soils so that they will continue to be able to support the production of quality fruit well into the future.

I believe that the biodynamic methods used at Cullen Wines in Margaret River provide the best soil health which is crucial for achieving wine quality and sustainability. This enables the purest expression of terroir with natural yeast for primary and malolactic fermentations, no acid additions, and oak is a complement to

the fruit. We are thus gentle on the earth and yet make the best quality wine and we do not try and impose a personality on the land and wine such as irrigation synthetic fertilizers .Only the use of composts, homeopathic remedies recommended by Steiner and sulphur all applied using the antipodean astro calendar to provide life and food for the vines. In particular I believe to farm with this intent is the best way to express the great and unique qualities of Margaret River chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon wines.

Thank you.