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MW

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TASTING ARTICLES

MARGARET RIVER

CHARDONNAY

AUSTRALIA



## Scrutinising Chardonnay



*Reporting on the 'world's best white' from Margaret River, including the 38th edition of the benchmark Chardonnay tasting held at Cullen winery, pictured above.*

For professional palates within the region, there is no doubt: Margaret River makes the best Chardonnay in the world. And while there is bound to be jingoism in such judgments, tasting the actual evidence builds up a persuasive argument.

Nor is this breaking news. Jancis described a triumph for Margaret River Chardonnay in her write-up of the 32nd edition of the Cullen International Chardonnay Tasting six years ago. In our tasting-note database, 48% of Margaret River Chardonnays score 17 or above. Well-informed wine lovers revere Chardonnay from Margaret River legends such as Pierro, Leeuwin, Cloudburst and many others. But can all these illustrious efforts really dethrone white burgundy as the world's best Chardonnays?

Over a 10-day visit to the region this month, I attempted to find out.



hear the word once while I was there. This most French of terms perhaps sounds condescending to Australian ears. Yet it provides a handy framework to examine what makes wine so good: climate, soil and winemaking.

The last factor can be scrutinised most easily. Chardonnay is famously malleable, and can display the spice of new French oak or the pungent matchstick aromas from reductive handling – or sometimes both. Yet Chardonnay winemaking practices across Margaret River are now remarkably un-divergent. The philosophy is entirely hands-off.

Oak maturation is routinely around 10 months in barriques or puncheons, with a percentage of new oak below 50. True, even small changes can make big differences to Chardonnay, but in practice oak influence in Margaret River Chardonnay today is integrated and discreet. Larry Cherubino, recently awarded the Outstanding Wine Producer Trophy by the IWSC, believes that reasons to cut oak usage are both to reduce cost, and to consider the sustainability of using trees that are felled in France and shipped halfway around the world. He is using 80% less oak in his winery now, and has adopted concrete eggs in their place.

Reductive handling is also closely controlled these days. The fashion for strongly stylised aromas of struck match and flint is now far less *en vogue*. Where they are present, they are subtle: working in support of fruit flavour, rather than dominating it.

However, there is one notable winemaking trend in Margaret River Chardonnay: malolactic fermentation is generally avoided, leaving the wines with a prominent acidic tang. This promotes particular freshness of fruit, although it can be mouth-puckeringly shrill in a few outlier cases.

Other than that, Margaret River wineries are doing little different to any other top Chardonnay region; quality must therefore be coming from the vineyard.



The vineyards in front of Larry Cherubino's cellar door, October 2023

One of Margaret River's best-known claims to Chardonnay fame is the local Gingin clone. Its natural inclination for *millerandage*, which produces bunches with both large and small grapes, is said to produce particular intensity of fruit. However, winemakers were just as likely to bemoan its low yields as to praise any apparent uniqueness, and there are increasing examples of Margaret River Chardonnays made from other clones (such as the Dijon clones 75, 76 and 95) that are just as good in quality. Gingin Chardonnay might have once been considered the region's trump card, but that is by no means the whole story.

Margaret River's temperate climate, with cooling influence from ocean breezes and a long, dry ripening season offers favourable conditions for Chardonnay, regardless of clone. High winter rainfall minimises the need for irrigation throughout the summer, and the fruit produces high natural acidity at moderate potential alcohols (rarely above 13.5%). Soils are mostly iron-rich, red and friable, as revealed in the unpaved roads that criss-cross the countryside like arteries. Attempts to subdivide the region have so far failed because boundary lines would be more political than geological.

This amenable climate and largely similar soil type unveils one of Margaret River's key advantages in making superlative Chardonnay: consistency. The volume of producers achieving such high quality is remarkable; perhaps the region's reliability for producing great Chardonnay in every vintage has afforded winemakers a faster track to these heady heights.

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It is certainly true that every single Chardonnay I tasted during my visit delivered a formidable minimum standard that is rare for any region, let alone Burgundy. Another big part of consistency is closure, of course, and it doesn't hurt that the widespread adoption of screwcap has eliminated the vagaries of cork, as well as redoubling the freshness of fruit that seems such a natural asset of Margaret River Chardonnay.



There was no better test of Margaret River's consistency than Cullen's annual tasting of the best Chardonnays from the region and beyond. This year, they were all from the 2019 vintage. Vanya Cullen, the Matriarch of Margs looking resplendent in blue, opened proceedings by telling us that it was a fruit day. 'Very Vanya', a friend of hers later commented. Biodynamics is indeed the lynchpin of this celebrated estate, known for making some of the region's very best Chardonnays.

There were 24 wines in the line-up, served single-blind: we knew the wines, but not the order in which they were poured. We therefore knew that half were from Margaret River, a further six from elsewhere in Australia, leaving four burgundies and one each from California and New Zealand. With this much information, the stakes are fairly low for making informed guesses.

The burgundies were easy to identify for all the wrong reasons. The combination of the warm 2019 vintage and cork closure left them all very obviously less fresh. Even the best of them, a Puligny-Montrachet Premier Cru, was below par. I found the riper Ramey from Sonoma quite easily too, and Giaconda was also a standout. But with especially strong scores from Xanadu, Victory Point, Juniper, Voyager, Cullen and Windows (which was most frequently cited as one of the region's most exciting names), Margaret River was the clear winner.

Is it really the best Chardonnay in the world, capable of beating burgundy? On that particular fruit day, it was – and any sceptics should taste the evidence for themselves.



Your correspondent is peeking into the left of the frame above, next to MW student and publican Foni Pollitt of [Mayfair Lane](#) in Perth, and wine writer Cassandra Charlick. Opposite is Angus Hughson, founder and publisher at [Winepilot](#).

The first group of 24 tasting notes is from the Cullen International Chardonnay Tasting, presented in order of tasting; the second group is a miscellany of 22 Margaret River Chardonnays tasted elsewhere, presented alphabetically by producer (sur)name. You can re-sort the results if you wish.

# The 38th Cullen International Chardonnay Tasting

## Victory Point Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River 17.5

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 10 months in French oak (40% new).*  
Pure fruit, more citric than tropical, light dairy notes. High acid with a tense, zesty finish. Leesy texture and a lick of caramel on the aftertaste. Still maturing. Not burgundy. Yarra? (RH)  
Drink 2021 – 2029

## Ten Minutes by Tractor, SV3 Chardonnay 2019 Mornington Peninsula 17+

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 10 months in French oak.*  
Clean, precise citrus. Layered, intense grapefruit on the palate. Lots of appley acid to finish. Very cool place, almost English. Tasmania? (RH)  
Drink 2021 – 2031

## Famille Paquet 2019 Pouilly-Fuissé 16.5 -

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*Tasted blind. Aged for 12 months in oak (10% new).*  
Lots of malolactic flavour, plus an oxidised bruising to the fruit. Oak that feels a little grubby. Tight palate, apple and lemon. Lots of tang. Skinny build. An odd juxtaposition of an evolved nose and still-zesty palate. Burgundy? (RH)  
Drink 2020 – 2024

## Juniper Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River 17.5

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 10 months in French oak (45% new).*  
Lovely oak tone as well as sulphidic complexity. Light body, tense acid, chewy texture, smoky finish. Stylish, elegant, lengthy. Has a certain Aussieness about the pure fruit. Margaret River? (RH)  
Drink 2021 – 2029

## Voyager, MJW Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River

17.5

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*Tasted blind. Aged for 11 months in French oak.*

Fuller, softer style than many other Chardonnays in this tasting. Orchard fruit.

Tangy yet smooth, almost glutinous texture. Long and mineral-style finish.

Substance and ageability. Australian, perhaps from a warmer part? (RH)

Drink 2021 – 2031

## Giant Steps, Applejack Vineyard Chardonnay 2019 Yarra Valley

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 10 months in French oak puncheons (20% new).*

Towards tropical fruit: pineapple, baked citrus. Deliciously generous after some of the more acid-driven styles. Bold but not blowsy. Has the weight and style of Chardonnay from Victoria. (RH)

Drink 2021 – 2024



**Fraser Gallop, Palladian Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River** **16.5**

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*Tasted blind. Fermented in French oak puncheons.*

Smoky, toasty oak plus reductive sulphidic aromas. Super-acidic: positively tart and sharp. Oak seems askew, and could be taken down a peg. Surely cool climate – Margaret River? Marlborough? (RH)

Drink 2021 – 2024

**Deep Woods, Reserve Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River** **16**

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 9 months in French oak.*

Vegetal notes, underripe but balanced. Needs more primary fruit. This is lean, tight and tangy. (RH)

Drink 2022 – 2024

**Tolpuddle Chardonnay 2019 Tasmania** **17.5**

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 9 months in French oak.*

Butter, lemon, apple, toffee. Bold oak that has great fruit balance. Integrated, high acid. Long, stately, refined. Has something classic about it, but it's too precise to be Burgundy. Cool Australia? (RH)

**Vasse Felix, Heytesbury Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River** **16.5 +**

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 10 months in French oak.*

Restrained nose, tight but fleshy palate. Tangy with oatmeal/cereal notes.

Textural, limited length, full body. Seems there is more here, but it's been caught napping. Margaret River? (RH)

Drink 2023 – 2030

**Windows Estate, Petit Lot Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River** **17.5 +**

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Tasted blind. Dairy nose with great fruit definition too, zestiness and sophisticated oak on the finish. Measured, subtle. A thing of beauty. Top burgundy? (RH)

Drink 2023 – 2031

**Dom Gérard Duplessis, Montmains Premier Cru 2019 Chablis** **16 -**

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*Tasted blind. Aged for 12–18 months (dependent on vintage) in French oak (10% new).*

Distinctive candied-apple fruit with an oxidised touch. Not unbalanced but a fuller, lower-acid style with lots of weight. Feels tired on the finish. Burgundy, surely. (RH)

**McHenry Hohnen, Burnside Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River** **17+**

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged in oak (25% new).*

Toasty, creamy, ripe-fruited and smooth. Nice mineral tang on the palate. Long, restrained, layered. Lots going on here. Margaret River? (RH)

Drink 2021 – 2031

**Xanadu, Stevens Road Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River** **18**

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Tasted blind. Apple, zesty lemon juice, this is bursting with energy. Long, defined, bracing and serious. A real bullseye for Chardonnay, coming together in perfect harmony. Margaret River? (RH)

Drink 2022 – 2032

**Oakridge, 864 Funder and Diamond Drive Block Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River** **17.5**

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 10 months in French oak puncheons (20% new).*

A bit sulphidic on the nose, but there is wonderful fruit that has a floral muskiness that makes me think of Mâcon. Pouilly-Fuissé, maybe? (RH)

Drink 2021 – 2029

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**Shaw + Smith, Lenswood Vineyard Chardonnay 2019 Adelaide Hills** **17.5**

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 10 months in French oak puncheons.*  
Awesome nose: oak, smoke, spice, bonfire. Full and ripe on the palate. Relatively soft acid. Chewy and persistent texture. Lovely self-confidence. Australian; Yarra? (RH)  
Drink 2021 – 2026

**Lowestoft Chardonnay 2019 Tasmania** **17.5**

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*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 10 months in French oak (35% new).*  
Potent nose with reductive matchstick trickery backed up by gorgeous fruit, a full body and a long and textural palate. Among the best Aussies. Giaconda? (RH)  
Drink 2021 – 2031

**Maison Champy, Les Bouguerots 2019 Chablis Grand Cru** **16.5**

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*Tasted blind. Matured for 9 months in French oak.*  
Confected fruit, perhaps lacking intensity. Layered, chalky texture. Not quite together, the acid feels soft. From a warmer place? (RH)  
Drink 2022 – 2028

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## **Pyramid Valley, Lion's Tooth Chardonnay 2019 North Canterbury** 17

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*Tasted blind. Matured in French oak for 17 months.*

Lots of dairy character, then zipped-up acid on the palate. Precise and bright, with lots of creaminess. A bit too upfront, doesn't persist as you might hope.

Burgundy? (RH)

Drink 2021 – 2025

## **Ramey Chardonnay 2019 Russian River Valley** 18

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Tasted blind. Pineapple, baked citrus, loads of tropical fruit. Really gorgeous. Yum yum, this is Chardonnay and its fruitiest and most alluring. Sonoma?

(RH)

Drink 2023 – 2029

## **Giaconda Chardonnay 2019 Beechworth** 18

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*Tasted blind. Matured for 20 months in French oak barrels (20% new).*

Tons of sulphidic influence: matchstick, flint. Incredibly juiciness beneath. This has the style of great Victoria Chardonnay, to me. Really smart, thanks to the underlying fruit ripeness. (RH)

Drink 2022 – 2031

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**François Carillon, Les Combettes Premier Cru 2019 Puligny-Montrachet**

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**17**

Tasted blind. Pineapple candy, baked apple, toast, marzipan. Lots of opulence here. Event a bit of nuttiness emerging. Falls away a bit on the finish. Burgundy? (RH)

Drink 2022 – 2026

**Leeuwin Estate, Art Series Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River**

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**16.5**

*Tasted blind. Fermented and aged for 11 months in new French oak.*

Buttery nose with cooked fruit. Leesy, textural and with a strong hard-cheese flavour. Esoteric, tight, perhaps too much dairy. (RH)

Drink 2023 – 2030

**Cullen, Kevin John Chardonnay 2019 Margaret River**

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**17.5**

*Tasted blind. Matured for 8 months in French oak (30% new).*

Precise, fresh fruit with green apple, lovely subtle butter notes, layered and mealy on the finish, Sophisticated and savoury. (RH)

Drink 2023 – 2030