



The future makers

Australian wines for
the 21st century

Max Allen

Phillip Jones Bass Phillip

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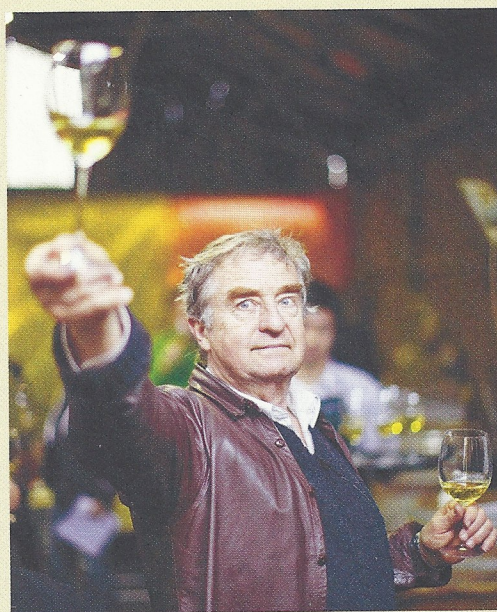
The personal and professional renaissance of Phillip Jones is one of Australian wine's great comeback stories.

At the end of the last century, for various reasons, some business-related, some private, the already famously cantankerous winemaker lost the plot a bit. His legendary, if inconsistent, wines went into a prolonged slump. The corksorks continued to rave about their annual allocations, but in truth, the wines were really quite disappointing. The little girl with the curl (when they were good, they were very, very good, but when they were bad...) had turned into the empress with no clothes.

Signs that Phillip was back on track began with the 2004 vintage: suddenly here were wines that once again possessed the unique robustness of spirit that had characterised the best Bass Phillip pinots from previous decades. By 2006, the revolution was in full swing: 'We chucked out 30 old barrels that year,' says Phillip. 'We waged a war on VA [volatile acidity] in the cellar.'

Since the 2007 vintage, the quality of the Bass Phillip wines has been as good as, or better and, crucially, more consistent than, ever before. The greater attention to detail in the winery is clearly paying off. But adopting biodynamic principles in the vineyard is also a contributing factor.

On a trip to Burgundy in 2006,



Phillip had tasted many wines made using biodynamic techniques and was converted: 'Here were wines from people I'd been buying for 20 years, but they were different, because of the BD; I was blown away by how good they were, even Michel Lafarge's lowly little aligoté was fantastic.'

So from spring 2006, Phillip started applying biodynamic compost preparations to his already virtually organic vineyards. And he has been enormously impressed by the results. 'In just a couple of years I've seen the vines come into balance,' he says. 'In one vineyard we've always had trouble getting the juice and wine to fall bright; since going BD, I've had no problems. The use of biodynamic processes imparts energy to the end result. So, to me, biodynamic wines, if they're well done, are more energetic, they're more vibrant. And I

see, in white wines sometimes, there's a luminescence. I also think you can taste the terroir more clearly now.'

And what terroir! Or rather: terroirs. Jones has five vineyard sites, mostly planted to pinot noir ('mostly MV6, too: clones don't matter when you're cropping as low as I am, and you can't taste the difference after a few years in bottle anyway') but also a dribble of chardonnay, gewurztraminer and gamay.

There are four hectares of vines on the oldest, Estate vineyard (also known, in characteristic Jones fashion as 'Head Office'), first planted in 1979 around the winery near Leongatha, plus one extremely close-planted pinot noir vineyard (17,000 plants squeezed into one hectare) across the road. Both these blocks are on deep, silty, grey ferrous loam with some buckshot running through it.

Twelve kilometres to the north, at Leongatha, the 10-hectare Village vineyard is on fine grey silt again, but has a more northerly aspect. Issan, 17 kilometres to the east of the winery, is just under 3 hectares on even finer, siltier, hungry soil, resulting in less vigorous vines and truculent cropping (five worthwhile vintages in 14 years, says Phillip). And the Belrose vineyard, 25 kilometres to the north, is 3 hectares on heavy mudstone.

Bass Phillip viticulture and winemaking is uncompromising: all the vines are dry-grown, low-yielding (as little as 120 grams of grapes per vine in some cases), with the fruiting wire at knee

height. 'The closer you get to disaster the closer you get to the best solution,' he says. 'And the closer you get to serious fungal disease problems the closer you get to the finest, most complex aromatics in wine, I reckon. That's why we've got grapes so low off the ground: because the humidity there is double what most Australian growers have them at.'

The pinots are crushed and destemmed and given a few days cold soak (waiting for natural yeasts to kick in) before a week-long fermentation, then straight to barrel (mostly Allier) and bottling by hand after about 15 months. Wherever possible, Jones will avoid pumps, believing that the wine can be 'torn' by the process; buckets are used to transfer the newly fermented wine from vat to press. Fining and filtration get short shrift in this winery, too: a wine might be passed through a 'mothcatcher' – 150 micron steel mesh – before bottling if it's lucky.

The Bass Phillip whites are better than ever. The gewurztraminer ('my hobby wine' says Phillip) is all steely cut and mineral and puckering dryness. The 'standard' Estate chardonnay has flashes of opulent golden richness and luscious fat, while the Premium chardonnay, which spends longer on lees, is tighter, leaner and more wheatmealy.

The rosé is a delight, juicy rosehips, summer flowers and dried herbs, as is the gorgeously succulent and ripe gamay. There is a similar succulence and richness to the Belrose pinot noir, and while I

adore its heady dark raspberry fruit, Phillip is typically dismissive: 'Yes, it has the deepest fruit of all my pinots, but that mudstone soil gives it the shortest finish.'

There is outstanding definition in Phillip's other pinots now. The Issan reflects its tough site: pale, tart and spicy, with an underlying autumnal woodiness. The Crown Prince, made from the Village vineyard, is earthy, open, textured, forward. The Estate is upright, rich and layered. The Premium, mostly made from the oldest vines on the original property, is tighter, with more powdery tannins and finesse. And the Reserve – a single barrel's worth made from a small block of vines that exhibit what Phillip calls 'bunchus erectus', where the grape clusters literally

point upwards instead of hanging down – is rich in brawn and flavour.

And then there's the pinot made from that single, crazy close-planted hectare. This is the wine I'd choose if I wanted to prove to any sceptic, anywhere, that Australia is capable of producing jaw-dropping pinot noir: as well as the vigorous intensity of wild forest fruit that characterises the best of Phillip's other pinots, there is a profound, assertive quality to the tannins and the lingering finish that takes your breath away. And as Phillip points out, the plants are yet to reach their tenth birthday; it is slightly scary to imagine how good the wine from this special site will be when the biodynamically grown vines are mature.

