

Max allen writes about wine:

“VINEYARD PROFILE - HITTING PAY DIRT”

In the heart of the Hunter, a special patch of earth produces extraordinary fruit, coveted - and utilised - by some of the region's leading winemakers.

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YOU drive past and there's no sign, no clue. Glance out from the comfort of your speeding car, and it's just another gentle hill covered in vines. Plenty of those here in the Hunter Valley. More than enough, in fact.

But this hill isn't like the rest at all. This is the Howard family's Somerset vineyard, one of the best in the region. You wouldn't know it to look at it - but you can taste it. There are thirty-two hectares of vines here, and the harvest is sold each year to more than a dozen grateful wineries around the place. In most cases, the fruit is blended with grapes from other vineyards. But some producers not only keep wine made from the Howards' fruit separate and bottle it on its own, but also pay the ultimate compliment of naming the vineyard on the label.

So you'll see the Howard name on bottles of semillon from Tower Estate and Meerea Park, on bottles of shiraz from Evans Family Wines - all leading producers. And when you do, you'll know that what's inside is one of the best Hunter wines you can taste: the recently-tasted 1999 Tower semillon, for example, is simply a great wine - supremely delicate, complex and gently easing into a long maturity - which should be tracked down by all lovers of this classic Hunter style.

Vineyard designation is common in France, of course; in Burgundy, for example, dozens of different growers and makers take grapes from, for example, the Clos de Vougeot and although they'll bottle it under their own label, they'll prominently display the fruit source.

In Australia, while single vineyard wines are becoming more and more common, it's still unusual to find more than one producer selling wines made from grapes grown on the same patch of dirt - unusual, at least, to see that patch of dirt credited on the label.

Every winemaker who takes Howard-grown grapes from Somerset is effusive in his praise for the quality of the fruit.

'Howard shiraz has a character all its own,' says Meerea Park's Rhys Eather. 'Part of that has to do with the vines themselves, I think. The Howards got their cuttings from Stevens, an old vineyard in the area which was originally planted with shiraz from the Busby collection (dating back to the early 19th century). The wine from that red soil tastes like nowhere else in the Hunter.'

Simon Thistlewood, winemaker at Bimbadgen, who takes semillon and verdelho from Somerset each year, agrees, but gives the credit to the grower as much as the ground. 'The grapes have a unique character, because Glen (Howard) does such a great job out there,' he says. 'There's nothing fancy to the growing; it's just get-your-hands-dirty stuff. After generations in the Hunter, the family really know what they're doing and just stick to it.'

Driving his beat-up old ute around the property, Glen Howard is remarkably low-key about the whole vigneron affair. 'I'm not a great wine drinker,' he confesses. 'But I like growing grapes. I like seeing a vine planted and grown and picked and quality fruit being delivered to the winemaker's hands. And then I like to ask if there's anything I can do to improve quality next year.'

Glen reckons, though, that while his meticulous farming is important, and having good vines in the first place is crucial, the land *is* the key to the quality of fruit from this hill. He drives up to a crest, where the land falls away to the north-east, and points out two blocks of shiraz vines, slap-bang next to each other.

'One block was planted in 1966, the other in 96,' he explains. 'When they were first established, the younger block cropped higher and there was a marked difference in quality. But over the last couple of years, the younger vines have come into their own, the yields have come down, and now I reckon the quality's about the same.'

In other words, the dirt is more important than what's planted in it. It's not just any old dirt, either; there are two distinct soil types on the Howard property: red earth over limestone on the slopes, and running through these russet outcrops, old water courses of sandy soil over yellow clay. In well-established Hunter tradition, the best semillon comes from the sand, the best shiraz from the red soil.

And the best patch of all is on top of the hill, where the soil is shallowest and the vines are gnarled and appear half-dead. 'There's something about old vines,' says Glen. 'I reckon if the sap is forced to flow around twists and turns, then it's all the better for the fruit.' It's this block that provides grapes for the Evans Family Reserve Shiraz, which in years like 1997, 98 and 2004 is one of the best, most classically regional red wines produced in the Hunter: all spice and leather and, yes, the taste of the earth.

As Simon Thistlewood points out, the Howard family's understanding of the land and what it's capable of has come through many decades of trial and error. Glen's great grandfather, Thomas Howard, first planted shiraz here in 1865, and built a rudimentary winery using timber from the property. The building, now used as a barn, still stands.

After Thomas' son George took over in 1919 he expanded the property by buying his neighbour's vineyard. The fruit was obviously good, as some found its way into wines made by the legendary Maurice O'Shea at the Mount Pleasant winery up the road. But even great vineyards became unviable during the depression, and Somerset's vines were pulled out, to make way for cows.

In 1965, though, Glen's father Ivan saw the rumblings of what was to become the wine boom, and replanted the vines - partly, Glen says, because 'there was no money in dairying in those days.'

Not that grapegrowing is always a lucrative business, mind you. 'We struggled through the 60s and 70s, and we've had to pull the strings in a bit for the last three or four years,' admits Glen, adding, wryly: 'In the old days, my grandfather sold wine to O'Shea for fivepence a gallon. Hasn't gone up much since, has it? It was only really in the late 90s that we made any money - and whatever we've got out of the vineyard, we've put back in to the country.'

So what keeps him going? 'I still get enthusiastic when I see the product at the other end. And it's nice to get the recognition on the back labels.'

TOWER ESTATE
Cnr Hall and Broke Rd
Pokolbin
ph: (02) 4998 7989

sales@towerestate.com
www.towerestatewine.com

MEEREA PARK
Boutique Wine Centre
Broke Road
Pokolbin
ph: (02) 4998 7474
bwc@hunterlink.net.au
www.meereapark.com.au

EVANS FAMILY WINES
Lot 92 Broke Road
Pokolbin
ph: (02) 4998 7237
evansfamilywines@bigpond.com

BIMBADGEN ESTATE
790 McDonalds Road
Pokolbin
ph: (02) 4998 7585
www.bimbadgen.com.au

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