



# COLOUR CONSCIOUS

Big reds continue to dominate the Heathcote landscape  
and no one does it better than Sanguine Estate.

MICHAEL HINCE

SURPRISINGLY, given its reputation for sublime shiraz, my first Heathcote red was an early 1970's cabernet from Paul Osika's Graytown cellar door. Subsequently an occasional Zuber Estate, a Tudhope Heathcote Winery or two, a flight from Wild Duck Creek, a modicum of Mt Ida (sadly, one of its original co-owners, artist Leonard French, died recently) and many a Jasper Hill hastened my conversion to and love of Heathcote shiraz. Even hardened whisky drinkers like Jeff Kennett succumb to a glass or three of Whistling Eagle now and then!

When I visited Heathcote in the early 1980s I was amazed by the ability of its young, immature vines to produce such complex, deep, harmonious flavours. Little wonder the likes of She Oak Hill's 45-year-old vines are making consistently good wines now.

To what extent and in what way do Heathcote's deep Cambrian soils contribute to its shiraz's uniqueness, individuality, pre-eminence and universal popularity

is beyond me; suffice to say I love warm climate, full-bodied, inky, voluptuous reds. None more so than Mark Hunter's Sanguine Estate's consistently fine, ambrosial 2013 Progeny and his luxuriant 2014 D'Orsa. It's no coincidence that Hunter makes wine under contract for She Oak Hill, Domaine Asmara and for the private label of former cricketer and latterly horse racing fanatic Simon O'Donnell. My introduction to Hunter's wines was an O'Donnell Red Red Wine; it was sensational.

Established in 1997 in the heart of the Heathcote GI, Sanguine Estate's 22ha vineyard and winery are surrounded by three of the region's oldest vineyards - Jasper Hill's Georgia's Paddock, Seppelts Mt Ida and She Oak Hill. Its roots date back to the mid to late 19th century when Hunter's great, great grandfather Pietro D'Orsa set up a small vineyard in Maldon.

"Our family still owns the original Maldon vineyard and we took cuttings from it and

grafted them on to some Sanguine vines, one of which was muscat gordo blanco and the other remains unidentified," says Hunter. The "mystery" varietal is slightly pink in colour and when vinified exhibits strong cumquat and mandarin flavours. It will be available as a dessert wine later this year.

Made offsite in 2000, Sanguine Estate's first shiraz vintage, dubbed a "fruit bomb with a 45-second residual sensation" sold out within a week. Initially Hunter learnt from the likes of Matt Hunter (no relation) from Langanook at Sutton Grange and Red Edge's Peter Dredge.

By 2004 the Sanguine Estate winery was up and running and a year later Hunter wisely engaged Ben Riggs with whom he works to this day. "Ben's been invaluable in helping me achieve consistency of style. He's a brilliant blender and encourages me to keep experimenting," Hunter says. Hunter relies on indigenous yeasts for nearly all his ferments and is constantly doing something different with each of his 16 small fermenters.

Understandably low-yielding shiraz dominates the plantings, supplemented by small lots of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, petit verdot, merlot and viognier mainly for blending, with chardonnay and tempranillo making up the rest.

Apart from its obvious vibrancy and velvety richness, what distinguishes Heathcote (and Sanguine) shiraz is "its complex tannin profile and its opulent, mouth-filling texture; it's all about texture, texture, texture," says Hunter. Plus of course, its ability to age well.

"Also Heathcote's many single vineyard sites and small producers help define the region's terroir and the complexity of its varying sites," Hunter continues.

For example, "at Sanguine it's not all about dominant, decaying Cambrian rock; we have a combination of shallow sandy loam over decaying mud stone on our highest site and silty clay from old river beds at our lowest point."

"There's also a deep seam of deep clay loam filled with decaying Cambrian rock taking up the bulk of our planting through the centre of our vineyards; these three differing sites offer exciting blending opportunities and allow us to make consistent and complex wines."

Yes, the region's traditional tannin shiraz "fruit bombs" remain popular, however diverse stylistic variations are a hallmark of contemporary Heathcote shiraz with "better viticulture and earlier harvests resulting in

a less alcoholic, prettier, more nuanced style," says Hunter.

According to Hunter "terroir is important, but terroir-driven wines don't have a monopoly on quality, vintage variation aside. Some winemakers are using whole bunches and a touch of viognier to make aromatic, savoury, spicy shiraz."

But there's more to Sanguine Estate than just good wine, there's an alluring energy, vibe or chutzpah that permeates the place. This is in large part due to Hunter's father, Tony, whose astute business expertise got Sanguine off the ground. Tony's also an entertaining cellar door host. The last time I visited I intended to stay for an hour, but four hours later I was still delving into the delights of a flight of D'Orsa!

Then there's Hunter's sister, CEO Jodi Marsh, whose marketing prowess makes the place hum, which is all about ensuring a visit to Sanguine is pleasurable, entertaining and, in the future, as interactive as it can be. Wine tourism is important to Heathcote, hence the need for more accommodation.

The annual Sanguine Chamber Music Festival, now in its fourth year, is rapidly growing in stature, acclaim and popularity thanks to the charisma of internationally renowned Australian cellist and chamber musician Howard Penny.

As the vines age so will the quality, finesse and diversity of Heathcote shiraz. And for an emerging varietal to add an overdue second string to the region's bow - my money is on tempranillo or sangiovese with Nero d'Avola as the dark horse.

Regardless, there is more to Heathcote than just shiraz and there's more to Sanguine Estate than just D'Orsa or Progeny. There's an upbeat sense of positivity and optimism that comes from "the glass being half full" or just being temperamentally sanguine - long may that continue!



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**Opposite Page:** Tony Hunter pruning the vines.  
**Above from top to bottom:** Mark Hunter vineyard tour, Sanguine bottles, Mark Hunter in the vineyard, the Great Grandfather of Tony Hunter, Pietro D'Orsa.