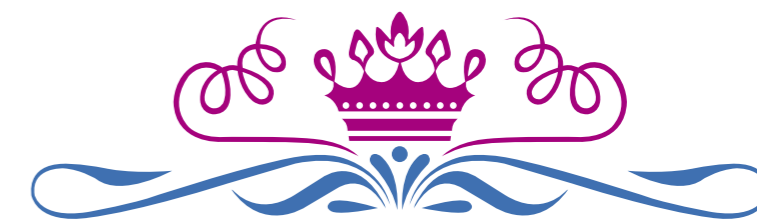


A new *Jewel* in the WINE CROWN



Winemaker Robert Olde believes Western Australia's Blackwood River wine region is on the brink of greatness.



MIKE ZEKULICH

"WE have in this wine producing area a sleeping giant, a hidden jewel - to most Australian consumers." That's the view of Robert Olde who is backing Western Australia's Blackwood Valley to become one of the nation's leading premium wine areas. That's a great challenge and there will be sceptics, as he knows. But confidence steeped in family agriculture and enormous faith in the wines already being made in his Latitude 34 umbrella group and elsewhere in the district sees him ready to show national consumers and those overseas that they have something special to look forward to. The Blackwood Valley, centred on towns like Boyup Brook and Bridgetown, is 260km south east of Perth. It takes its name from the Blackwood River - the longest continually flowing river in WA. Modern day pioneer Max Fairbrass began his industry challenge under the Blackwood Crest label in 1978 with his first vintage four years later - on land taken up by his grandfather William in 1906. He and other early settlers planted grapevine cuttings which survived for many years despite the

occasional white ant attacks. There are now some 50 wine grape growers in the district, including the biggest, Latitude 34, which has 85ha and a further 37ha at Margaret River. In a normal year it produces about 850 tonnes, providing for a range of 30 wines under five labels selling from \$12 to \$75 a bottle. Olde 44, whose early family farming operations were based on Albany and Mt Barker wheat, sheep and dairying, studied commerce at Perth's Murdoch University. But he quickly decided after a holiday job that following his father Bill into chartered accountancy was not for him. Instead, he became strongly involved with property development and has become one of the family shareholders and investors in the Latitude 34 Wine Company business which began grape production in 1997. "Our family has been involved since day one," Olde said. "With the vineyard improvements we have made, especially in the last three years, we are excited about the fruit quality the Blackwood can produce. I believe it is the next emerging region out of WA for quality



reds like shiraz and cabernet. As well, in the last three years we have grafted over some of the more exciting and interesting Spanish and Italian varieties to provide blending options and add a difference to the portfolio." Today the business is a fully integrated operation from vine to marketing and is one of the top 12 producers by volume in WA. Gold medals support the Blackwood wine quality case along with other accolades. After his father asked him to join the company in 2013 and take it to the next level, Olde was made CEO. He is also a director. But the passionate wine man, though convinced his father was right that they had the backbone to a "great business" was cautious. "I said I would only take it on if the grape quality I knew we could get could be translated into the bottle," he said. "We have made a lot of changes from the bottom up since 2013, including no herbicide use in the vineyard, developing our own composting program and using seaweed in a compost-based fertiliser mix. We can see the lift in grape quality with what we have done and are doing. It has made our vines thrive in the elevated warm dry conditions of the Blackwood while becoming disease hardy." In its history, Latitude 34 has moved from being a contract fruit grower to establishing a modern winery in 2004 to help it take control of its own fruit. It now sells off about a third of its wine production under its own labels with the balance

supplied to the high end bulk market. "The exciting part of our business is the depth of styles and brands we can now offer," Olde said. The leading wines in the portfolio are the Optimus Block two shiraz and Block three cabernet from the Blackwood Valley, with St Johns Brook (Margaret River) reserve chardonnay and reserve cabernet next. "Everything we do is based totally on fruit from our own vines," Olde said. "We are really proud of that and our progress. We now have an office in China. I believe exports have to be a stable part of any agriculture business. You have to look overseas if you are making more than your domestic market needs. "If other little-known Australian winemaking regions can show the world they can produce wines equal to the best internationally, so can the Blackwood. With our production of more than half that of the valley, it is up to us to lead the charge. So far wines we have shown overseas have enjoyed positive responses. We know the fruit quality and consistency is there, but the market is yet to perceive that. So we are yet to get the dollars and that reflects the challenge we have with consumers. "We will be taking our wines nationally this year so that wine lovers can judge for themselves. We want to wake consumers up to the Blackwood. It should be considered equal to Margaret River." And the name? Said Olde: "This is because all our vineyards are located on Latitude 34." And the money invested? "Too much," he said with a shy grin. 🍷



“ I believe it is the next emerging region out of WA for quality reds like shiraz and cabernet.”