

demand spikes for ekhidna

DAN TRAUCKI

UNLIKE our spiky/prickly native echidna marsupial, McLaren Vale's Ekhidna (which stands for She Viper) Wines, are smooth and rich. While svelte and elegant, these wines are certainly no wimps; being big and bold, but unlike a lot of other uber big wines, they do not have tannins and acid jutting out to attack the palate. They are well-integrated, smooth, rich and a real labour of love by owners Matt and Katy Rechner.

Matt started his winemaking career with Tatchilla Wines in McLaren Vale in 1992. He remained there through the Lion Nathan driven amalgamation with St Hallett's in 2000, before finally leaving in 2001 to pursue his dreams. Before officially kicking off Ekhidna Wines, Matt did a couple of vintages in Sonoma, California, at Geyser Peak, under ex-pat Darryl Groom. He also joined a small, elite bunch of winemakers when he won the Best Australian Shiraz award with his Ekhidna 2004 Linchpin Shiraz.

Ekhidna is a "small" operation in that it crushes around 300 tonnes of specially selected grapes each year. Most of the grapes come from its own 20ha vineyard and this is supplemented by carefully chosen fruit from around 30 to 40 growers in the Vale and Adelaide Hills. The winemaking philosophy is that of minimal intervention, as Matt believes that most of the work happens out in the vineyard and that the winemaker's role is to steer quality grapes into the end product - wines that are as natural as possible. While the white wines are fermented in stainless steel tanks, his

A small operation in McLaren Vale is making big gains in the wine world.

reds are cold soaked and fermented in the 35 one-tonne open fermenters that he has at his disposal.

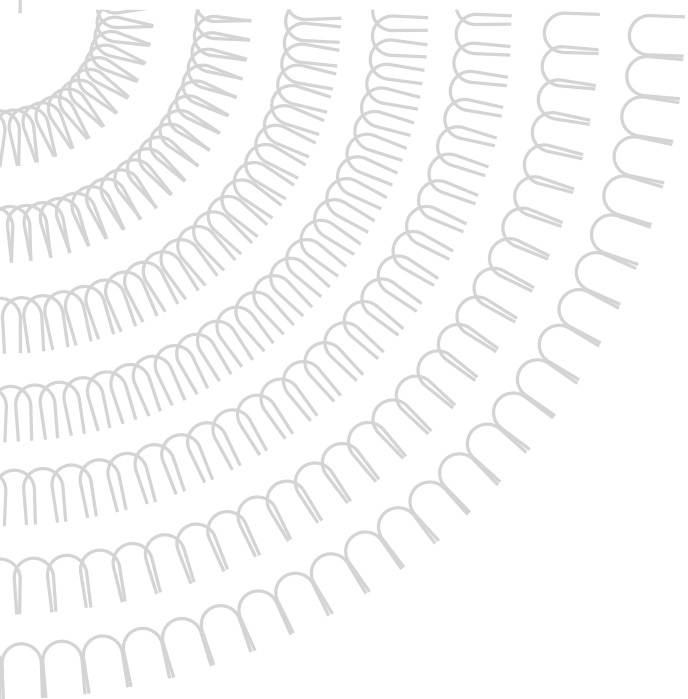
The Ekhidna experience starts with its three sparkling wines - a traditional sparkling chardonnay/pinot noir, a divine sparkling shiraz (which is currently into its fifth vintage) and a sweet sparkling

(which makes a stunning accompaniment for fresh apricots and peaches - divine).

The white wine range currently consists of a chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and an Adelaide Hills fiano, with an arneis to come soon. They are all flavoursome, consumer friendly wines which avoid the searing acidity that is usually found in young white wines. The sauvignon blanc is very classy and much more in a Sancerre style than that of a pungent New Zealand sauvignon blanc.

The style of red wines made at Ekhidna is big, but balanced and well rounded. One could quite easily say that the eight-wine red portfolio is shiraz-centric, with the only red that does not contain some shiraz being the Ekhidna Cabernet Sauvignon. There are five straight shiraz wines, starting with the delicious rosé, it is unlike many other rosé, which are sweet or sweetish, whereas this one is crisp and refreshing. Each of the other four straight shiraz wines builds on the intensity and depth of flavour of its predecessor so that when you reach the Rarefied Air Shiraz you are into uber serious shiraz territory. The massively coloured, complex nosed, gorgeously rich 2012 vintage of the Rarefied Air Shiraz makes





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a brilliant accompaniment for a good, hearty meat dish - a real winter warmer.

Like other winemakers around the country, Matt has declared that vintage 2015 was somewhere between very, very good and sensational. He is excited about the wines that will emerge from this marvellous vintage, especially Ekhidna's first graciano - a native Spanish red grape variety that produces vibrant, lighter-bodied, but big flavoured wines and is just starting to be planted seriously in Australia.

The Ekhidna style of wines resonates well with the wine-drinking public. So much so, that around 1200 people a week have been passing through the Ekhidna Cellar Door and Restaurant. Apart from its delicious range of wines, the cellar door also offers seven of Matt's excellent hand-crafted, small batch beers, including the very popular Ekhidna Ginger Beer. Additionally, just to round out the tasting experience, he also produces a preservative-free apple cider. As Matt says: "Our cider is just like eating apples without the chewing". A statement which is hard to argue with, when you taste this sublime nectar. This is all part of the "natural" philosophy at Ekhidna.

One fairly unique feature at Ekhidna is the "rare barrel experience", where a small group of enthusiasts get to spend the day with Matt going through the winery, tasting wines in barrel and creating their own wine blend. They take home bottles of their unique wine.

Having outgrown the current location, Ekhidna is looking for new, bigger premises, which it is planned will incorporate accommodation, so as to complete the total lifestyle offering to its customers. Due to the currently challenging retail environment, caused by the dominance of the major liquor retailers, Ekhidna is looking to focus its efforts more on the lifestyle aspects of wine, including social functions and accommodation.

Ekhidna Wines is a showcase of what McLaren Vale and its exciting winemakers can produce - really worth a visit, but allow plenty of time as it is a bewitching experience. 