

# MASTERING THE

# Hand Crafted Art

South Australian Geoff Hardy is at the forefront of a growing band of winemakers developing new rules for experimental wines.

## DAN TRAUCKI

ALMOST every wine growing region in the world has traditionally been quite happy to grow their own native varieties plus a few of the classic European varieties such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay.

But, no, not in Australia. Here growers like to tinker with the status quo and do things differently. It is hard to tell whether this is as a result of not having any native grape varieties, or part of the Australian adventurer's spirit.

Australia is one of the world's leading nations in vinous experimentation. Not only have Australians been leaders and innovators of many, if not most of the

technical oenological advances over the past few decades such as the use of screwcaps, but have also lead the way in doing things differently such as creating "weird", unheard of blends like Maurice O'Shea's Pinot Hermitage (shiraz), blending wines from different areas, the unique and quintessential Aussie blend of shiraz and cabernet, as well as producing sparkling red wines.

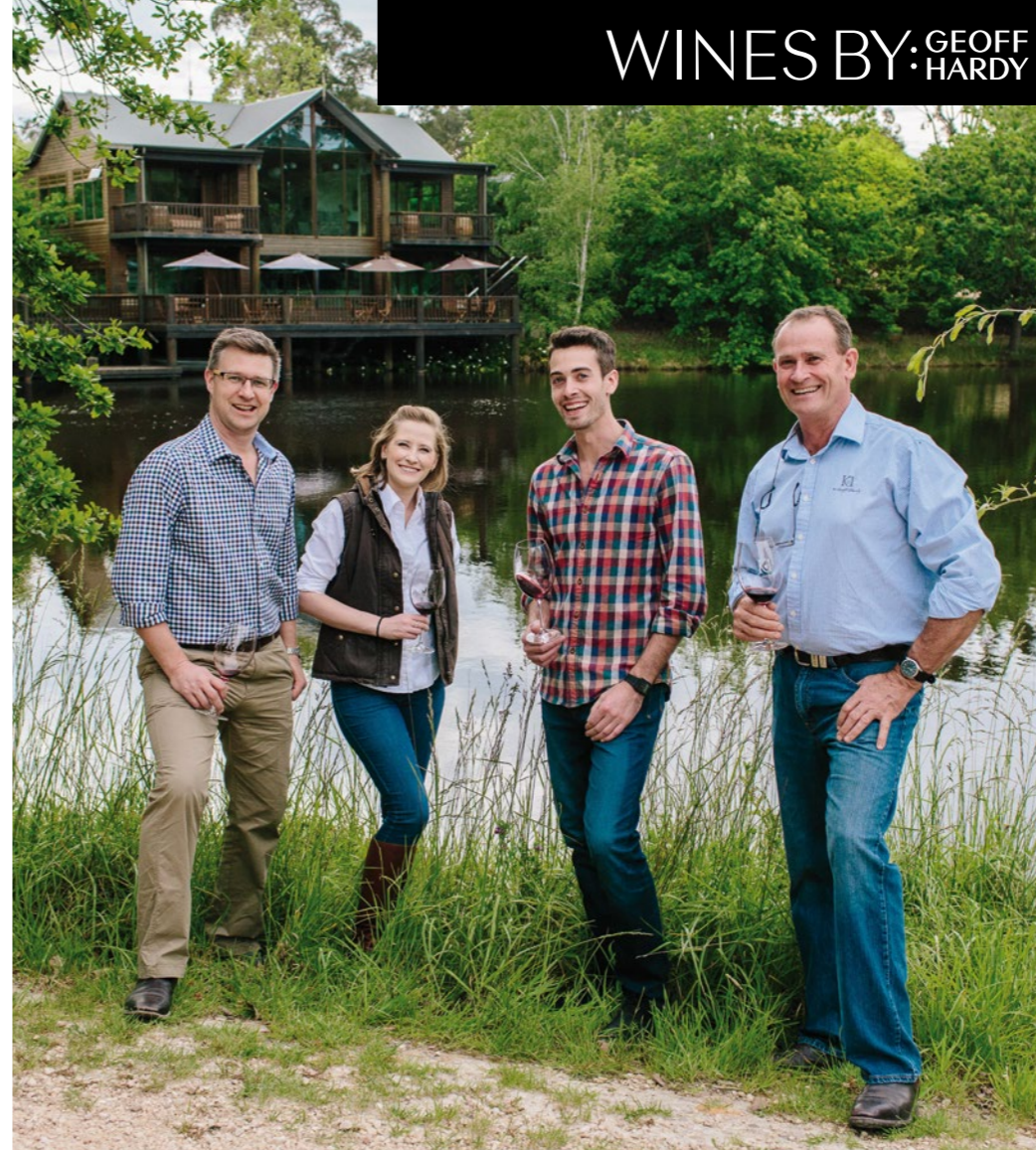
Australians also tend to disregard conventional wisdom when it comes to what they should plant and have sought out new innovative grape varieties which are likely to suit their local micro-climates.

This lack of respect for the "established

rules" of vineyard plantings has blossomed. Today, nearly 50 per cent of all Australian wineries make wine from at least one innovative variety. Most of these "experimenters" cautiously trials one or two new varieties as it is a long and costly process to ascertain if they are going to really work at their site. However, there are a few intrepid souls who are prepared to jump in the deep end, boots and all.

One such "experimenter" is Geoff Hardy, who under his "Hand Crafted by Geoff Hardy" label has been producing exciting wines from Mediterranean varieties, especially from some of the more interesting Italian and Spanish varieties. A gentle start





was made in 1999 with the delectable Italian red variety lagrein made from fruit grown on the Limestone Coast and in the Adelaide Hills. This was followed in 2000 by arneis (Italian white) and dolcetto (Italian red).

Hardy is an adventurous soul, because as he says, "we are always trying to grow something new. It is fun but dangerous (financially)". Since the late 1990s 20 new innovative grape varieties have been trialled in small patches in vineyards across two to four different districts with climates that are likely to suit the varieties being trialled.

"Hand Crafted by Geoff Hardy" is a very appropriate name for Hardy's "experimental" brand, which sits alongside "K1 by Geoff Hardy" (Adelaide Hills single vineyard brand) and "Pertaringa" (his McLaren Vale brand).

The wines of "Hand Crafted" are initially made in small batches so as to determine and demonstrate the variety's potential as well as to ensure that the wine is made so that the variety is treated like it should be – rather than making it in the same way as they make conventional varieties such as shiraz or cabernet.

A major part of the strategy at "Hand

Crafted" has been to, where possible, trial the selected varieties in different climatic areas so as to be able to determine in which region the variety performs at its best, then graft the less successful varieties over to those that work better in that particular vineyard. As Hardy says, "it is still very much a work in progress".

This experimentation has led to most of the "Hand Crafted" wines being made from varieties that originated in Italy or Spain, however, along the way a couple of Frenchmen have snuck in, with both durif and cabernet franc (a much underrated variety) having been launched recently. Both are tremendous examples of that variety. Another up and coming star in the portfolio is Austria's sensational white variety gruner veltliner, which is off to a flying start in the Adelaide Hills.

When asked what the current plans are, Hardy said: "The variety that we are most excited about right now is teroldego as it is very pretty and elegant". Teroldego is an ancient red variety that originates from the Trentino-Alto Adige region of Northern Italy. It was hardly grown outside this region until

recently, when there has been a little interest in the US and more interest in Australia. It is thriving in the warmer (compared to its homeland) vineyard of K1 at Kuitpo Forest and on the Limestone Coast. It is a gorgeous, very consistent variety producing alluringly, tasty, deeply coloured wines with naturally lower alcohol. In most vintages this wine ends up at around 12.5 per cent alcohol, but it is full-bodied and not thin and weedy like some lower alcohol wines.

Incidentally, teroldego is one of the parents to lagrein, another beautiful, deeply coloured Italian variety that the "Hand Crafted" crew have been working with. Lagrein expresses its regionality considerably more than many other Italian red varieties and batches of wine made from parcels of grapes from different districts are significantly different to one another, thereby providing the winemakers with more options for the "assemblage" of the final wine. Apart from producing very elegant, quite moreish wines, lagrein is also a very handy blender that can be used in small quantities to enhance the complexity and depth of colour of other red wines.



In the Spanish varieties, "Hand Crafted" has focused on the two red varieties of graciano and tempranillo. Tempranillo as a variety in Australia is in the process of becoming a "mainstream" variety in terms of popularity, with more than 350 wineries now producing either a varietal wine or using it in a blend. At present the "Hand Crafted" tempranillo grapes come from the Adelaide Hills and Limestone Coast, but Hardy believes there is a great future for tempranillo in McLaren Vale due to the Mediterranean-type climate of the region. Tempranillo wine is conducive to our "outdoors" lifestyle and is relatively easy to produce.

Graciano is another Spanish red grape variety that has been attracting interest, with some 40 odd wineries across Australia now producing wine from it, including "Hand Crafted". In Spain it is mainly grown in Rioja - Spain's most famous red wine growing area. It is another deeply coloured variety like lagrein and teroldego, which has the propensity to age well and thrives in arid, warm climates, but has a tendency to overcrop if not looked after carefully.

Other innovative Italian and Spanish varieties currently available in the "Hand

Crafted" range include fiano and arneis in the white wines and nero d'avola (nero), montepulciano (monte) and aglianico in the reds. Hardy is excited about all three of these reds: nero for its "lovely fruit and great potential," monte for its "grunt and

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style" and aglianico for the "challenge and gorgeous flavours". Challenge, because it is by far the last ripening variety that he works with. Hardy calls it "the long wait" as some years the grapes aren't picked until up to four weeks after Easter.

Chief winemaker Shane Harris says: "Attention to detail is imperative to achieve the best and bring out the real personality of these innovative varieties, thus making them into something that is relevant and meaningful to wine consumers. There is no rule book and very little history of these varieties in our soil, so it means going back to basics and spending time in the vineyard getting to know them. Their growth habits, bunch shape and structure, watching the impact of sun and weather on the vines, and most of all taste, taste, taste!"

"Each year we aim to learn a little more about each individual variety that we are working with, which I think is definitely showing in the wines; they are a lot more focused and expressive than when we first started."

Given these great achievements to date with innovative varieties, it will be interesting to see what other exciting new varieties Hardy and his team trial over the next few years as they, along with other innovative winemakers go about hand crafting the future of Australian wine. 🍷