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Margaret River, a renowned wine area in Western Australia founded in the mid 1960s, has since become a fine wine region offering coveted labels.

## PUREST WINE REGION

# When

Nick Power, CEO of Margaret River Wine Industry Association welcomed me to Perth one morning in late November

2011, he gently reminded me, "We'll be on the road for the next two to three hours before arriving at our destination." It was indeed a much appreciated reminder for an 'islander' not accustomed to extended driving. In our local context, three hours' drive would have landed me in between Malacca and Kuala Lumpur, or in the sea. Nevertheless, the road trip was apt for me to observe the environment and limitations of the region as well as understand the area's uniqueness.

The purpose of my visit was to assume the role of an International Wine Judge at the 10th Margaret River Wine Show, and I could not have come at a better time of year. The weather was perfect, with that familiar warmth of the sun but not the humidity weighing on my skin. The pleasant climatic condition was, however, short-lived, as a devastating bushfire was to rage in the region in the midst of the wine show. Nevertheless, at the end of my visit, fire was not the only thing raging in the region; the quality of Margaret River wines was definitely 'firing on all cylinders'.

## Pristine Environment

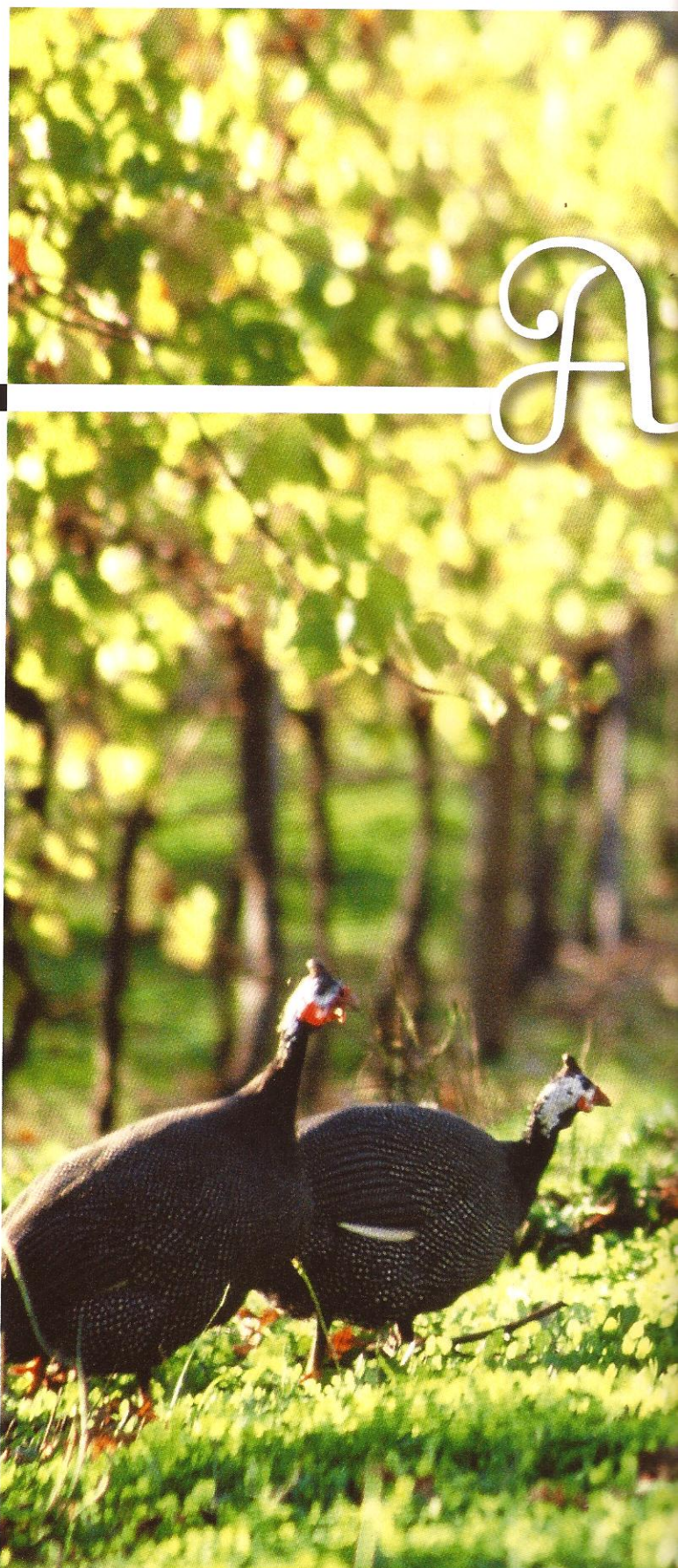
Since the first significant planting of grapevines in 1967, Margaret River has grown exponentially, with critics remarking that it has risen to the status of a great wine-producing region. Testament to such acclaim are the various top accolades consistently won by many Margaret River wines, both in national and international wine competitions.

To put things in (statistical) perspective, more than 20 per cent of Australia's premium wines originate from this region, yet it only makes up three per cent of the country's total wine production.

Located south-west of Perth, administered by both Busselton shire in the north and Augusta shire in the south, Margaret River has not only become an admirable wine region, but is also renowned for its unspoiled beaches — it is home to one of the most popular surfing spots in Australia. Incidentally, surfing not only attracts many tourists but also the wine region's residents, such as Dr Mike Peterkin of the renowned Pierro Wines, as well as his taiji disciple and my host, Nick Power.

With so much positive energy and accolades heaped on the region, what then is the unique factor of Margaret River? Power proudly responds, "It's the purest wine region in the world; naturally, we produce the best wines."

Indeed, the pristine area is blessed with superior vine-growing conditions — a Mediterranean climate with maritime influence. An immaculate environment means vineyards have ideal humidity levels



# Pure Land<sup>3</sup>



during the vine-growing cycle and are not affected by diurnal temperature (extreme summer or winter temperatures). As the region is sited on a cape surrounded by oceans on its three fronts, sea breezes are common occurrences, so trees and shrubs are planted as windbreakers, protecting the vines especially during the flowering period.

Heading southwards from Perth towards Margaret River, the surrounding areas appear to be a flat land, but once you enter the wine region proper, you will see a landscape of rolling hills. Within the wine region, the gently rolling hills are dominated by high-altitude features — the Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin that mark the north and south boundaries of Margaret



River respectively. The effect of wind from these two boundaries impact the wine styles; wines made in the north exhibit more ripeness, while those in the south display finer nuances and structure.

## History & Growth

A relatively large and youthful wine region, the roots of Margaret River's wine industry can be traced back to a recommendation presented in a report in 1965 by Dr John Gladstones, an eminent agronomist. It is interesting to note that most of Margaret River's wine pioneers were medical professionals. Of the first five wineries established in the region, three were initiated by medical doctors, namely Vasse Felix (Dr Tom Cullity), Cullen Wines (Dr Kevin Cullen), and Moss Wood (Dr Bill Panell). Leeuwin Estates and Cape Mentelle complete the pioneering lineup.

Throughout its growth, there were three noticeable waves in the succeeding decades. The pioneers initiated the first wave from

### fragile business

During the Margaret River bush fire at the end of 2011, wineries such as Leeuwin Estate, Xanadu, Voyager, Redgate and Vasse Felix were evacuated as precautionary measures.



## A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

The first sign that something had gone amiss in Margaret River occurred on the last day of judging at the Margaret River Wine Show, with whisperings of a raging bushfire in the south of the region. Apparently, a controlled forest burning at the National Park went wayward when the wind direction changed and gathered speed. More than 400 fire-fighters were deployed to fight the fast-spreading bushfire. Although most locals were getting on with their daily chores amidst the hullabaloo, the edginess and worries of the community were noticeable. Some 32 houses and nine holiday chalets were destroyed, although most damages occurred in National Parks running directly along the coast in the southern end of the region. The fire was brought under control eventually as the weather cooled down and it started to drizzle. Throughout the ordeal, my National Service days put in me good stead — I wore shoes to sleep and had everything packed in one bag. From that calamity, I have come to understand, at an intimate level, the fragile nature of viticulture and the wine business, and have deeper level of appreciation when enjoying a glass of wine. More importantly, I can identify the unpredictable settings that grape growers, winemakers and wineries have to manage in producing a bottle of wine. Most admirable of all is the undefeated spirit and perseverance of the locals in facing such devastation, the worst in the region in at least a few decades; it is testament to their pure courage, strength and character.



*An air of prestige is attached to a bottle of Chardonnay when 'Margaret River' is etched on the label.*

the late 1960s to early 1970s. Those men aspired to make great wines with Cabernet Sauvignon, a variety that Dr Gladstones recommended for planting in the region.

The second wave, which lasted from 1970s to early 1980s, ushered in social and economic growth for the region. The introduction of more passionate vine growers and winemakers improved the groundwork established by the pioneers. At the same time, a desire among some new entrants to grow and make wines for commercial endeavours also led to the development of various key infrastructures suitable for tourism, which ultimately benefitted the community.

The 1990s saw more investments pouring into the region that made way for an exponential growth of the wine industry. It was also during this period that two noticeable trends emerged — those who plant vines for passionate reasons, and others for the purpose of investment.

To date, plantings have expanded multifold and wine producers have increased to more than 120, with most wine estates being family-owned and boutique in terms of size and production.

### **Varietals & Wine Styles**

The major wine styles that have had tremendous success in Margaret River are the Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon blends, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Sauvignon blends. (For wine lovers familiar with Napa Valley wines, the flagship varietals in Margaret River are similar to the jewels of California i.e. Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon.)

Margaret River is also constantly associated with Bordeaux due to the similarity in climatic condition (maritime influence), general soil profile (gravel and clay) and two prominent white and red wine styles (Cabernet blend, and Sauvignon Blanc Semillon blend). On the international stage, it is Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon that are regarded as the representative wines of Margaret River, and the listing in *Langton Classification* is a testament of the strength of those two varietals.

### **Chardonnay**

An air of prestige is attached to a bottle of Chardonnay when 'Margaret River' is etched on its label as such standing is almost universally recognised in the wine world. One of the best examples is the Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay that impresses many with a concentrated yet complex expression, enhanced by a noticeable but pleasant fruit intensity.

But despite the high pedigree accorded to that wine, it is Pierro Chardonnay that gets my vote. From my observation and experience, there is clearly a trend to craft a fresher style of Chardonnay, with minerality/flintiness, peachy fruit, light touch of oak (rather than the

### **The Award Winners in the 2011 Margaret River Wine Show I**

This year's 10th Margaret River Wine Show saw Dan Murphy, an Australian wine retail chain, as the main sponsor of the wine competition. It also witnessed a 25 per cent increase in wineries' participation and a 47 per cent jump in wine submission. The quality of the wines submitted for the wine show has been consistently high, and prompted chief judge Iain Riggs of Brokenwood to share that it can be "scary" in the awards given to all submissions. Nigel Gallop of Fraser Gallop, and President of the Margaret River Wine Industry Association, recognised that the wine show provides the region a benchmark and milestone in measuring its progress. I hope too, that my observations on the dynamics of Southeast Asian and Asian wine markets were beneficial to the Margaret River wine community. Here is a list of some of the award winners:

**BEST RED WINE OF SHOW:** Ringbolt Cabernet Sauvignon 2008

**BEST WHITE WINE OF SHOW:** Vasse Felix Heytsbury Chardonnay 2010

**BEST CABERNET SAUVIGNON:** Ringbolt Cabernet Sauvignon 2008

**BEST CHARDONNAY:** Vasse Felix Heytsbury Chardonnay 2010

**BEST SHIRAZ:** Xanadu Next of Kin Shiraz 2010

**BEST SINGLE VINEYARD ESTATE RED:** Woodlands Cabernet Sauvignon 'Shelley Anne' 2008

**BEST SINGLE VINEYARD ESTATE WHITE:** Cowaramup Wines Margaret River Reserve Chardonnay 2010

**BEST CABERNET SAUVIGNON BLEND:** Amelia Park Cabernet Merlot 2008

**BEST SAUVIGNON BLANC & SEMILLON BLEND:** Brygon Reserve Bin 828 Semillon Sauvignon Blanc 2011

**OPTIMUS ALIAS BEST OTHER:** Tigers Tale Cabernet Merlot Shiraz 2010

dominant, big buttery style), and generally a restrained approach than a blowsy style.

## Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon (SBS)

Be it Sauvignon Blanc Semillon (SBS) or Semillon Sauvignon Blanc (SSB), these two blended wine styles have become closely associated with the region. Produced mostly as a dry and fresh wine, the wines are, more often than not, meant to be enjoyed in their youth, served as aperitif, and are great companions to grilled food or seafood.

At times, additional varietals are blended

be quite noticeable, especially when it is a young wine from a cool vintage. Nonetheless, these elements contribute complexity and structure, which makes Cabernet Sauvignon from this region distinctive among its peers.

I have found Cullen, Moss Wood and Woodlands to be some of my preferred Cabernet wines in the region. (Moss Wood and Woodlands also craft interesting Pinot Noir.)

## The Emerging Red Varietal

Shiraz is increasingly viewed as the next red varietal that will provide an alternate identity to the Margaret River red wine landscape.

Although the red grape has a strong presence in South Australia and New South Wales, its strength in Margaret River was inconspicuous in the early decades. In today's context, appropriate experimentation and keen interest have allowed Shiraz to emerge as a formidable contender to Cabernet Sauvignon's reign in the region.



*Wines made from Cabernet Sauvignon were the first to win acclaim for the region.*

with SBS or SSB to create an 'entry level' white wine category — the Classic Dry White, which is a refreshing wine that you can depend on for daily enjoyment.

## Cabernet Sauvignon

Cabernet Sauvignon was exalted in Dr Gladstones' presentation as the varietal that will excel in Margaret River. Predictably, wines made from this noble grape were the first to win acclaim for the region, and have continued to do so consistently year after year.

The style, however, has evolved over the decades. Although the expression remains intact, using physiologically-ripened grapes to provide the core flavours, some of Margaret River's Cabernet Sauvignon can also proffer pleasant savoury notes, and its tannins can also

Nuances of Margaret River's Shiraz are best expressed by characteristics associated with coastal influence. Shiraz exhibits a medium-bodied and refreshing note enhanced by red fruits, framed in a balanced and compact structure. Its flavour profile certainly distinguishes itself from the full-bodied, rich and concentrated style of Barossa Valley or McLaren Vale.

The region is indeed young when measured by the global wine world's barometer. In today's standing, achieved through the pioneers' vision and sheer diligence, it is also a huge accomplishment by any account. Even so, in a dynamic wine world, given the major shift of demand to the Asia continent, it is paramount for Margaret River to continue to progressively engage the market; this could only put the region and its future in good stead. 🍷

## The Renowned Wines of Margaret River

Recognised as a credible indicator in seeking out the 'Grand Cru' and 'Premiere Cru' wines of Australia, the *Langton Classification* chart reflects the quality and demand of Australian fine wines' standing locally and internationally. In its latest listing, Margaret River wines that were admitted to the chart include:

### EXCEPTIONAL GROWTH CATEGORY:

Cullen Diane Madeline Cabernet Merlot, Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay, Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon

### OUTSTANDING CATEGORY:

Pierro Chardonnay

### EXCELLENT CATEGORY:

Cape Mentelle Cabernet Sauvignon, Howard Park Abercrombie Cabernet Sauvignon, Vasse Felix Heytsbury Cabernet Blend

### DISTINGUISHED CATEGORY:

Leeuwin Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Vasse Felix Cabernet Sauvignon, Voyager Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot, Woodlands Cabernet Sauvignon

### THE FOLLOWING LIST, THOUGH NOT EXHAUSTIVE, ARE SOME OF THE MARGARET RIVER WINERIES THAT CAN BE FOUND OR HAVE MADE THEIR PRESENCE IN THE SINGAPORE MARKET:

Amberley Estate, Arlewood Estate, Ashbrook Estate, Brookland Valley Vineyard, Cape Grace Wines, Chalice Bridge Estate, Clairault Wines, Celestial Bay, Devil's Lair, Evans & Tate, Fermoy Estate, Flinders Bay, Juniper Estate, Laurance Wines, Lenton Brae Wines, Moss Brothers, Olsen Wines, Redgate Wines, Ribbon Vale, Sandalford, Saracen Estate, Suckfizzle/Stella Bella, Willespie, and Xanadu.