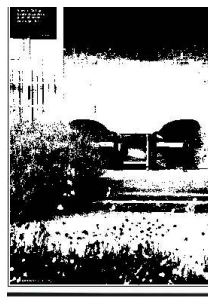


Stone aged

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Queensland boasts 10 geographically diverse wine regions, and one in particular is looking to mix it with the big guns from down south... The Granite Belt is on a mission.

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QUEENSLAND GRANITE BELT

Vineyard Cottages & Café, Ballandean (left);
 Therese and Peter Stark of Boireann (below);
 pinot noir grapes (below left)



T

ALK TO AN EXPERIENCED winemaker from anywhere in the wine world, and you will possibly raise an interested eyebrow if you use the G-word. Granite soil is sought after by winemakers looking to make truly great wine – shiraz in particular – as it delivers superior structure and definition; wines with complexity, detail and an esteemed mineral-like quality. From Beechworth in Victoria to Portugal's Douro to France's Rhône Valley, granite soil is highly prized dirt.

Queensland's Granite Belt is a three-hour drive from Brisbane, winding gently through Cunningham's Gap to high country. It's a similar cruise out west from the Gold Coast. From northern New South Wales, take the Bruxner Highway through Lismore.

The region is one of Queensland's most tightly defined, stretching just 60km from north to south and roughly half

as wide. Dotted along the New England Highway, the town of Tenterfield sits immediately to the south, Warwick to the north and Stanthorpe marks the centre of the region.

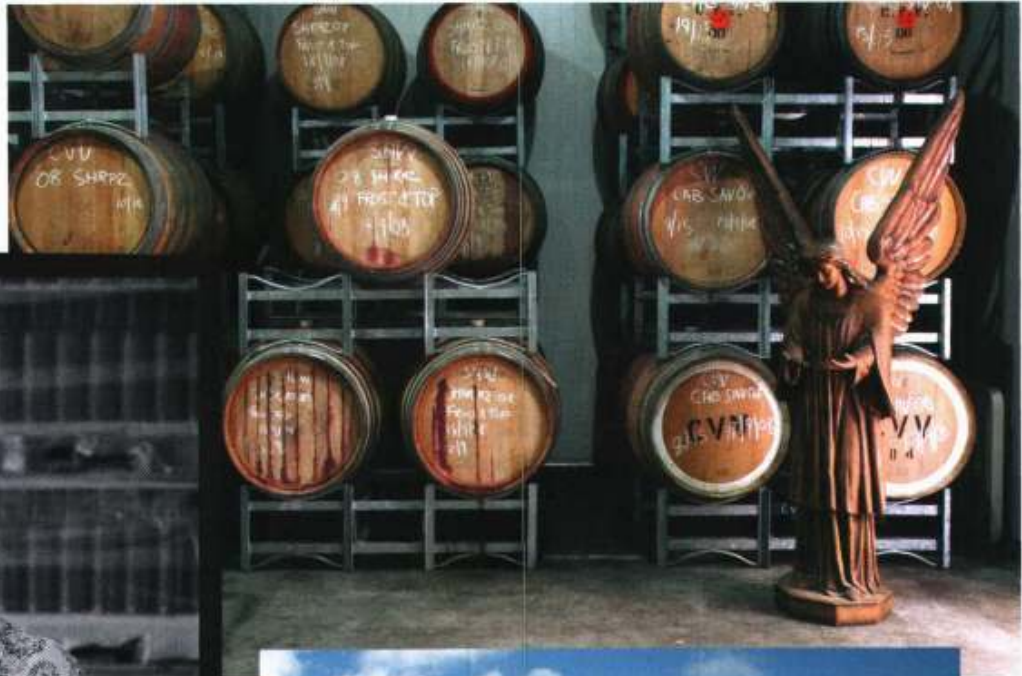
Beyond the granite soils, the vital ingredient in the region's ability to deliver on wine quality is elevation, which ranges from just under 700m to more than 1200m above sea level. This means less humidity than the rest of south-east Queensland and a very cool winter in which frost is a real threat to production. It dealt a cruel blow to the 2007 vintage.

Distinct seasonal conditions have long supported the stone fruit and apple orchards – a backdrop to the emerging patchwork of vineyards. In this part of Queensland there's a full set of four distinct seasons instead of the more usual wet and dry duo. Rain arrives frequently in February, when grapes are approaching harvest, so the region's free-draining granite sands are a real asset as they prevent vines from taking on too much water at this crucial stage in the growth cycle. ➤



GRANITE BELT

Clockwise from right: barrels at Symphony Hill Wines; a good sign near Severnlea; Symphony Hill's Ewen Macpherson



Shiraz and cabernet sauvignon account for the lion's share of the Granite Belt's plantings, ahead of chardonnay and merlot. Then it's the usual Australian fruit salad of pinot gris, sauvignon blanc, viognier, semillon, muscat and cabernet franc. Verdelho has made a disproportionate splash thanks to a slew of awards and seems to deliver good results with little effort. Chardonnay remains a challenge but, on paper, should eventually succeed.

The affinity between shiraz and granite soil is a famous one and the region's producers are honed in on the potential for this grape to excel. The best examples are deeply coloured and have a distinctly spicy side to them. They're medium-weight with elegant cassis and berry flavours, and they don't need a lot of oak.

Shiraz carries the region's quest for mainstream appeal and there's a confidence game at play in defining its true regional character. Varietally, it's certainly the most well-known Australian red, but whether it's the wine that the region will hang its hat on in the long-term is a topic that sparks lively debate among local winemakers.

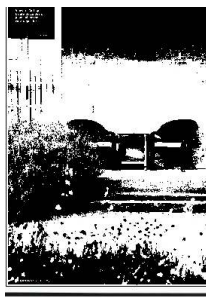
Cabernet sauvignon suffers the same market challenges here as in other regions, although that's starting to turn around. Says one local winemaker, "We make some bloody good cabernet, but nobody wants to buy it!" If you had to single out the most consistent red in the district it would be cabernet hands-down, and the wines demonstrate convincing raw potential. Winemakers are seeing how well merlot partners in, adding charm and smoothness to the cabernet frame.

Mourvèdre is the other red of real interest and seems to be soaring into a strong position from limited plantings. Boireann makes a straight varietal mourvèdre and also a mourvèdre shiraz blend. Both delve deep into the region's granitic influence and deliver compelling character. Warren and Sue Smith established Pyramids Road in 1999 and had the foresight to dig some mourvèdre into their tiny two-hectare plot. Again, stunning results in both a varietal and blended format.

The quizzical side of the region is best discovered via the inspired Strange Bird wine trail, taking in producers and wines that explore the potential for alternative varieties. It's a fascinating collection of more than 20 wineries and includes varieties such as marsanne, viognier, pinot gris, chenin blanc, barbera, nebbiolo, tempranillo and durif. They showcase the region's potential and the commitment and verve of its winemakers – and make for fascinating tasting.

Wine grapes were introduced to the region by Italian families such as the Puglisis, who are still working in the area today. Salvatore Cardillo arrived at what is now known as Ballandean Estate in 1930 and set up a typical Italian garden, including wine grapes.

Two generations later, Angelo and Mary Puglisi replanted the vineyard, lobbying the Queensland Government to have wine grapes



Paola Cabezas-Rhymer (above) from Summit Estate (left); Boireann (top)

allowed into the state through quarantine. They set about commercial wine grape production, releasing their first wine in 1972, a '71 vintage shiraz, under the Angelo's label. They also made a rosé, muscatel and chenin blanc. Angelo's then became Sundown Valley Vineyards and finally, in 1988, national distribution arrived, and the name changed once more, to Ballandean Estate.

Their late-harvest sylvaner is legendary and has an impressive list of accolades to its name. Success came early with the 1974 shiraz and cabernet striking gold at the Brisbane Wine Show in 1975. Ballandean Estate has now accrued more than 50 trophies and 600 medals (47 gold) across Australia.

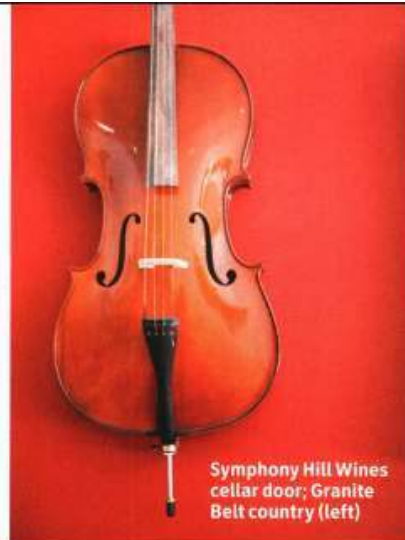
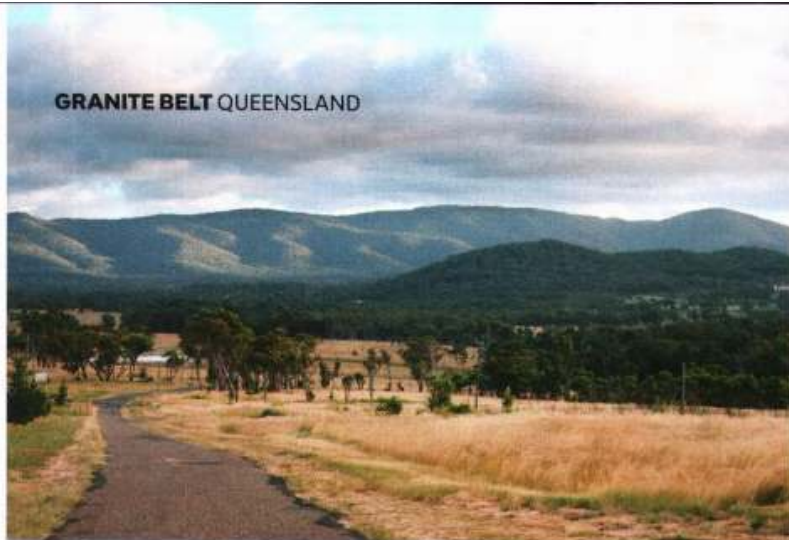
Mark Ravenscroft is one of the most recent medal-winning winemakers in the region. He won gold at the Royal Queensland Wine Show last year for his 2008 Ravens Croft Verdelho, logging the highest score in its class in a field open to all Australian producers. Ravenscroft was also honoured with the trophy for Most Successful Queensland

Exhibitor at the same show and, as if that wasn't enough, he was personally honoured with the Queensland Wine Press Club Trophy for his significant contribution to the Queensland wine industry.

Tree-changers such as the Macpherson family, who established Symphony Hill when they purchased a former fruit orchard in 1996, are adding determined savvy to the modern face of the Granite Belt. They have a keen interest in viticulture and, with an elevation that climbs beyond 1000m, they're looking seriously at pinot noir as a potential winner.

Special mention, however, must go to Peter and Therese Stark of Boireann. Their wines connect deeply with the region's deep, sandy granite soils and deliver more profoundly than any other. Their two-hectare vineyard began with cabernet sauvignon in 1995 and has progressively modified as the intricacies of their sheltered site have unravelled. This is true *garagiste* winemaking and the quality is on par with Australia's finest.





TOP DROPS

2007 BANCA RIDGE GATEWAY SERIES TEMPRANILLO \$20

Fragrant cherry fruits, smells like tempranillo and looks at home in this region. Gentle, savoury, earthy edges, fine tannins and cherry liquorice flavour. Terrific promise and raw potential. Mike Hayes, winemaker at Symphony Hill, is the wine college tutor.

2007 BOIREANN CABERNET SAUVIGNON \$25

Dense crimson purple colour. Rich cassis and brambly berry fruits; really vibrant. Elegant palate with creeping tannins and essence-like intensity. Gripping concentration.

2006 PYRAMIDS ROAD BERNIES BLEND \$35

A three-way blend of cabernet sauvignon, shiraz and mourvèdre with elegance and drive, and straight-shooting fruit aromas. Fine tannins from start to finish. This is a wine that really speaks of its site.

2006 SYMPHONY HILL WINES RESERVE SHIRAZ \$65

An elegant, medium-weight peppery and spice style with plenty of oak, some liquorice and light earthy notes. Nice depth, weight and plenty of flavour amid fine tannins that aren't nearly as challenging as the price.



For a regional overview, visit the Queensland College of Wine Tourism in Stanthorpe, also home to one of the area's most innovative restaurants. The 50-seat bistro is a TAFE-accredited training facility with first-rate staff and an outdoor deck for summer.

The college is also a working winery and is becoming a focal point for the region's winemakers, with a wine and grape analysis service and a microvinification research facility. Wines sold include some foundation wines donated by local makers, the college's own Banca Ridge Estate label made by students from the on-campus teaching vineyard, and the Banca Ridge Gateway Series (see the tempranillo review, left), made by the students with Granite Belt grapes.

There's a lot of action and energy packed into the Granite Belt, and there's a keen sense of pride building with every vintage. One local remarked that, in terms of its evolution, it feels a little like the Hunter Valley of 20 years ago. There is an engaging history to tap into and a pioneering spirit leading the way.

CELLAR DOORS

There's a lot to see in this growing region, which has about 50 cellar doors. It's suited to a short-stay visit, so the majority of wineries offer much more than just the wine they make.

Ballandean Estate, Sundown Road, Ballandean. (07) 4684 1226. www.ballandeanestate.com. Cafe open daily for lunch. **Boireann Winery** 26 Donnelly's Castle Road, The Summit. (07) 4683 2194. Closed until Easter Saturday, then open daily 10am-4:30pm until the wine runs out (about end July). **Symphony Hill Wines** 2017 Eukey Road, Ballandean. (07) 4684 1388. Open seven days. **Summit Estate Wines** 291 Granite Belt Drive, Thulimbah. (07) 4683 2011. Open seven days. **Whiskey Gully Wines** 25 Turner Lane, Severnlea. (07) 4683 5100. Open seven days.

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