



Clockwise from left *Selector* editor Mark Hughes, Wine Selectors Tasting Panel Member Christian Gaffey, *Selector* publisher Paul Diamond and wine writer Tony Harper.

Tasting Queensland

THE SOUTH-EAST CORNER OF QUEENSLAND IS GARNERING PLENTY OF INTEREST AS AN EMERGING WINE REGION. *SELECTOR* SAT DOWN TO SAMPLE WHAT THIS FERTILE AREA CURRENTLY HAS TO OFFER.

Words **Tony Harper** Photography **Kylie Hood**

Imagine for a moment that you are a Time Lord. You hop into the Tardis and scoot back to 1863 for a peek at the Australian wine scene...here's what you'd find. The oldest vines in the Barossa Valley would be still in their teens, the first Margaret River vineyards still a century away, those fabulous Hill of Grace 'Grandfather' vines in their absolute infancy and Romavilla, Queensland's first winery, sinking its roots into the soil. Yep, Queensland. And they are roots, mind you, which still exist today.

Yet despite the early start, Queensland wine producers have been slow to find their feet. The Granite Belt, which leads the state in terms of both quality and quantity, has been a winegrowing district for the past century. But its beginnings lie with Italian immigrants making wine from their surplus table grapes and, despite a handful of far-sighted protagonists, it is really only over the past decade that the region has begun to show its potential.

It's also the past decade that has seen the rest of the Queensland regions emerge; some already seeded by weekend winemakers, tourist traps and the occasional thrill seeker; others more carefully

planned by those who envisaged a rosy future for Australian wine growers and figured that Queensland could jump on the gravy train. Since 1999 the Queensland vineyard area has grown from a mere 700 hectares to more than 1500, and cellar doors from 48 to 185.

Today it is a state in ascendency. The latest release of James Halliday's *Wine Companion* gives Boireann, a Granite Belt winery, Five Red Stars, the guide's top accolade that puts it in the same vinous pond as Henschke, Moss Wood, Cullen and Giaconda.

Then there's an ever-expanding bunch of producers – Robert Channon Wines, Sirromet, Robinson Family, Ravenscroft, Symphony Hill et al – that have won some heavy trophies and medals in international, major national and regional wine shows.

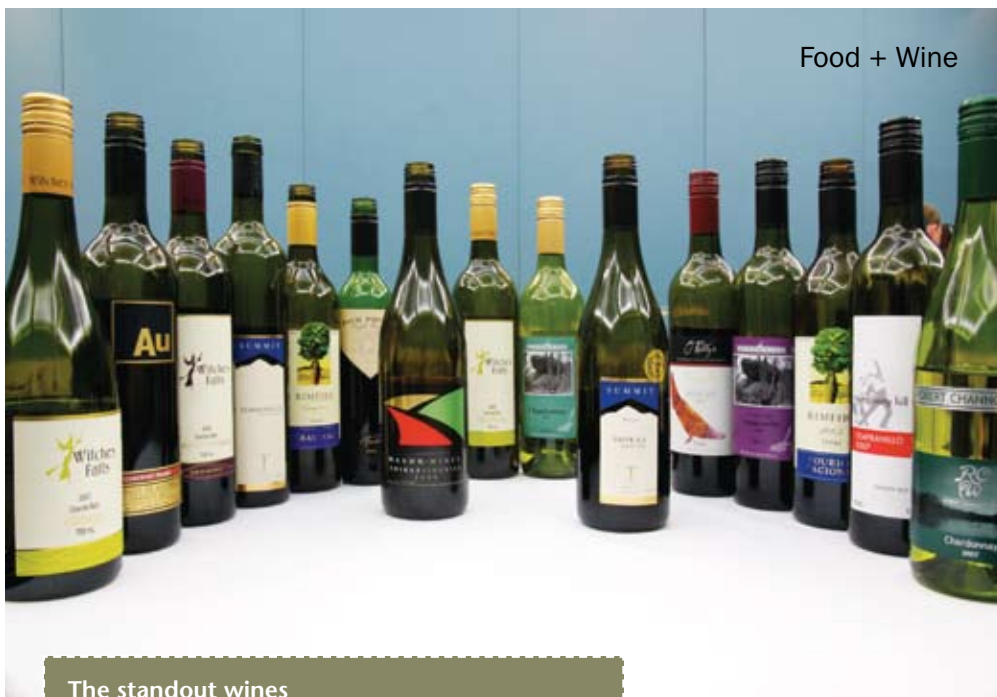
If anything, Queensland today reminds me of Tasmania when I first travelled through there a decade ago. The best producers are crafting expressive, technically sound wines. But there are still many who mar the potentially exciting fruit with clumsy and at times incomplete winemaking. The trick to finding a good Queensland wine is to put producer before region, vintage or variety.

The bulk of the state's best wines are born in the Granite Belt's cooler, high altitude vineyards. It is no accident that all but three of the wines that made the cut for *Selector* are the product of Granite Belt vineyards.

It is beautiful country; rugged and diverse, freckled with eroding granite boulders. The vineyard soils are dominated by decomposed granite with grains the size of raw sugar lending their porosity and mineral attributes to the vines and wines.

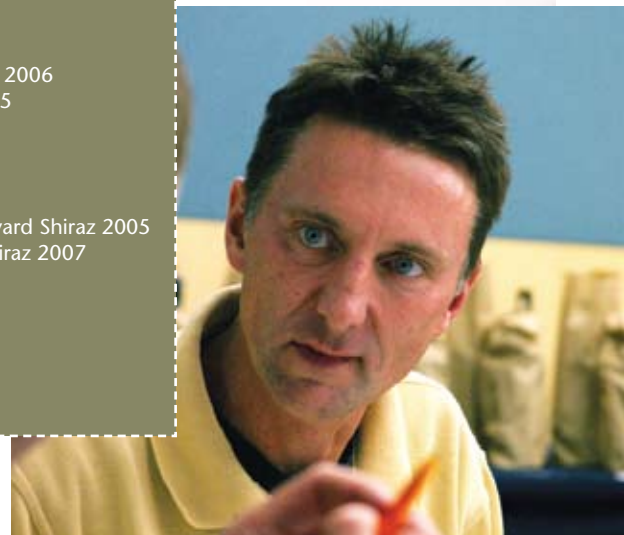
Shiraz and Chardonnay have been the traditional successes of the region; the better Chardonnays possessing a purity of fruit and bright mineral edge and the Shiraz medium bodied with savoury spice and whiffs of cracked pepper and garden herbs; a little like those from Victoria's Ararat, Great Western, Bendigo and the higher reaches of the Strathbogie Ranges.

It's little wonder that both Robert Channon and Witches Falls Chardonnays made their presence felt at the *Selector* tasting; both exemplify the pure, elegant expression of the grape that the Granite Belt can deliver with the right care.



The standout wines

- + Robert Channon Chardonnay 2007
- + Witches Falls Marsanne 2007
- + Witches Falls Granite Belt Chardonnay 2006
- + Witches Falls Cabernet Sauvignon 2005
- + Hidden Creek Chardonnay 2005
- + Hidden Creek Tempranillo 2007
- + Symphony Hill Tempranillo 2007
- + Summit Estate Tempranillo 2007
- + Summit Estate The Lovers Single Vineyard Shiraz 2005
- + Back Pocket Arabia Single Vineyard Shiraz 2007
- + Rimfire Touriga Nacional 2005
- + Rimfire Graciano 2006
- + Aussie Vineyards Cabernet Franc 2007
- + Mason Wines Shiraz Viognier 2006
- + O'Reilly's Canungra Valley Vineyards Platypus Play Devine Red 2007



Queensland today reminds me of Tasmania when I first travelled through there a decade ago.

But our tasting confirmed that there's a whole new wave, with seven out of the 16 finalists fashioned from alternative varieties. Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier, Malbec, Sangiovese, Pinot Gris and Petit Verdot have proven their potential and occasionally, in the better vintages like 2005, produced some amazing wines.

Rimfire, a Darling Downs producer, impressed the panel with a plump, slightly savoury Graciano (a Spanish variety) and a powerful, exotic red from the Portuguese grape Touriga Nacional.

Then there's Tempranillo; by far the most successful variety of the tasting. It's a grape that likes significant diurnal shifts; warm days and cool nights, warm summers and cold winters; an easy feat for the Granite Belt and most of Queensland's inland regions. The final feather in the Tempranillo cap is Paolo Cabezas Rhymer; winemaker at Summit Estate, Spanish, and a girl who has made more wine from the variety than any other winemaker in the country.

The Piedmontese varieties – Nebbiolo, Barbera, Dolcetto and Arneis – have only been tinkered with, but common sense (thinking through the similarities of altitude and continentality in both regions) and the early results hint at good things to come.

In terms of importance, next in line to the Granite Belt is South Burnett; much warmer than the Granite Belt, struggling (as do all Queensland vineyards) with summer humidity, but blessed with marked continentality and a band of very committed producers. Semillon, Chardonnay and Shiraz are the backbone of the area, with some fine expressive Cabernets occasionally rearing their heads. The Burnett wines tend to be fatter and more opulent than those from elsewhere in the state; perhaps a little Barossa-esque if a parallel needs to be found. I'd suggest that the omission of any Burnett wines in the final mix is more to do with youthful vines than it is about regional deficiencies. Again it is likely that the Mediterranean varieties will prove, with time, to be best suited to the area.

Dotted around the southern end of the state are vineyards and wineries in every direction, concentrated around the coastal hinterland, the Scenic Rim surrounding Brisbane and the Darling Downs.

Romavilla is still quietly plugging away in Queensland's Wild West, 145 years on and punching out some incredibly complex, rancio'd fortified wines.

Each vintage the Queensland bar gets raised a little, the peaks higher and the troughs less discernible as the wine-growers gain in experience. While new varieties and sites are explored, the wines are only going to become better and rare gems become par for the course. ■