

50 VINTAGES OF VAT 47 CHARDONNAY

By M. Bruce Tyrrell AM

2021 will be the 50th vintage of Vat 47 Chardonnay. It has been made every year except 2020 when the smoke taint from the bush fires made it unsuitable for winemaking. The fifty vintages have thrown at us the whole gambit of weather conditions from the flood year in 1971 where it rained almost every day of vintage through to 2007 at the end of the millennial drought.

We started planting Chardonnay following my father's great love of white burgundy, which was introduced to him primarily by Rudy Komon, Sydney art dealer and great palate. With Graham Gregory, Head of the NSW Horticulture Department, my father sought cuttings. The best and purest block was on HVD literally just up the road. There was a visit to the vineyard, which got us our first lot of cuttings, and all of our top Chardonnay plantings from then, to today, have been based on that clone.

The first releases were met with mixed opinions. 1973 was the first Vat 47 fermented and matured in new French oak. I remember McWilliam's Chief Winemaker saying, "well, Murray you have messed that up - no one in Australia will ever drink white wine with oak in it." The Chairman of Judges of the Brisbane Show, where it got six out of 20 said to me "the wine is either volatile and oxidised or it's the greatest white wine I have ever seen in Australia." Funnily, it went on to win 'Best White of Show' in Adelaide later that year.

The style has been through its periods of change, which coincided with both changing winemaker or a change in the international style of Chardonnay. The 1970s, with Ralph Fowler as winemaker, had great input from people like Rudy Komon, Len Evans but more importantly John Avery, English Master of Wine and Wine Merchant. At this time, John had the best burgundy palate on the planet and his direction was invaluable.

In the 1980s, Mike DeGaris was winemaker and we fell under the influence of the Californian Chardonnays; higher alcohols, malolactic ferment and the Wolf Blass saying, "no wood no good." At the end of 10 years of that regime, we realised that the wines were not aging as well as the 1970s, and that style of winemaking was dropped.

Andrew Spinaze became Chief Winemaker in 1990 but had worked intensively on Chardonnay from when he joined us in 1980. Andrew has now done forty vintages of Vat 47 and has really been the guiding hand in the quality, and the development, of Vat 47. In 1990, we reverted back to the finer, more elegant style, and Andrew set about selecting the oak that he specifically wanted for Vat 47. In those days, the fruit came from Short Flat, NVC and the Old Vines on HVD. In 2009, HVD came out of Vat 47 and as it is today was bottled as a Sacred Sites wine. Today Vat 47 comes solely from the Short Flat.

The key change in our winemaking in the last 30 years has been the re-introduction of

"Vat 47 is one of Australia's best Chardonnays and invariably, they look better with a few years of age on them."

Gary Walsh, *The Wine Front*

"Vat 47, the first quality Chardonnay to be made in the 20th century, for long the pace setter."

James Halliday, *Australian Wine Companion 2010*

basket pressing. The Vat 47 is all handpicked and comes out of the vineyard two handpicked bins at a time, and is crushed directly into the basket press. Gentler handling has improved the colour, reduced the solids in the juice, and I believe made a big difference to Vat 47's quality. In the last 15 years, we have put people around the picking bins and the fruit is cleaned, and the leaves removed in the vineyard, so the winery only gets the best fruit.

Three times in the life of Vat 47 we have held vertical tastings for the press. The first, to mark 21 vintages in 1992, in the boardroom of the State Bank of NSW. The second, for 30 years in 2002, in the boardroom at Price Waterhouse Coopers to celebrate the release of the 2000 vintage and the change of the name from Pinot Chardonnay to Chardonnay. Then again in 2018 to celebrate 47 vintages of Vat 47. I have set out some quotes from these:

Lester Jesberg, 1992.

"Vat 47 is unquestionably Australia's leading Chardonnay in terms of track record, cellaring potential and current form."

Decanter Magazine, September 1983.

"Tyrrell's Vat 47 1982 Chardonnay is a stunner. A wine of sheer breed that I would back against any Frenchman in fifteen years' time."

Michael Broadbent, one of England's foremost writers on wine, November 1992 singled out Tyrrell's 1976 Vat 47 and described it as "the equivalent of a great Meursault in a great year."

Throughout all of the 50 years, as things have changed and we have experimented, the one parameter that has never changed is that the fruit is 'King'. Oak maturation, basket pressing, solids in the ferment etc. are there to add nuances to the final wine but are always secondary to the flavour that comes from the vineyard.

The working of the vineyard remains cane pruned, clean cultivated and handpicked. One of the great assets of the Hunter Valley is that it gives us wonderful strong acid and low pH, which means that these wines will all have the ability to age for 10 years or more. The ability to age, and hold their fruit, are the hallmarks of great wine.

In writing this piece, I realised that I am the only one here who has seen and played a part in every one of these 50 vintages, and I look back over them with a great deal of pride and feeling very lucky to have been able to follow Vat 47 through its entire lineage, to watch it grow, develop and improve, over that time.

Throughout the last 50 years, my favourites have been; 1973, 1979, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2009 and 2017. Since the 1971 vintage Vat 47 has been awarded 30 trophies and 241 gold medals.