



Drinks

Philip White

McLaren's warriors

This year's top Southern Vales grenaches already are making claims for their region as the variety's best home

PETER Fraser was edging towards the matter of alcohol. We had our noses in his 2006 reds from the mighty Yangarra vineyard. "I don't even check sugar any more," he explained. "You get too preoccupied with it. I pick when the tannins are ripe." There is no shortage of alcohol in Yangarra reds. But it doesn't make my exhalations hot. It just seems to add extra silky smoothness to the wine's luxuriously slick texture.

"I don't buy yeast, either," Fraser added, as if to drive a final skewer through his Roseworthy education. "None of these wines have had any cultured yeast. It's all natural. All wild."

As he described the number of friendly, but disbelieving rivals he finds curiously nudging their sniffers at his taps, I pretty well fell into my glass.

Yangarra reds are remarkable creatures for their character and distinction, and it's not so much a style Fraser imposes on his wines, but a personality they take on themselves from their amazing vineyard and carry through ferment and maturation, because of his lack of interference.

The vineyard in question is on an ancient sand dune near Kangarilla. It's not marine sand, but the ferruginous grey remnant of the mighty mountain range that almost weathered away completely before we called it the South Mt Lofty Ranges.

These sands, called Blewitt Springs sands, or Maslin sands, appear to have no organic nutrient whatever, but they impart incredibly peaty complexity to red wines.

Those ripe tannins Fraser speaks of – they come from the pips as much as the skins – draw the texture of the wine from silk through satin to velvet, leaving the lucky drinker with a feeling that's somewhere between tuxedo and sheets, properly doused in Jean Desprez' Bal a Versailles perfume.

This is particularly the case with the 2006 grenache, which will go into Yangarra's Cadenzia blend. Farther along the vintage track, I found Steve Pannell who, with a crew of nine, had just managed

a 5700-tonne vintage at the old Southern Vales/Tatachilla winery in the main street of McLaren Vale. How'd it go?

"Everyone wanted bloody sauvignon blanc", he said, disbelieving. "Somebody's decided sauvignon's the go. We like the work – we're contract winemakers – but, you know, it's crazy."

What sauvignon blanc? "Any sauvignon blanc. Or pinot gris. Everybody wants that, too, whether they know what it is or not."

When Pannell handed the glasses out, he didn't waste them on whites. He dived straight at a tank of impossibly rich, black grenache. Then an even richer, blacker shiraz. Then a blend of the two: majestic, imperial, mighty.

This wine was as intense as the Yangarra stuff, but perhaps just a little less streamlined, and more angular. Which is not to say it won't go very fast: the first of Pannell's own brand wines are out now and nearly gone. The might of his 2006 reds will see them moving even quicker.

That shiraz, by the way, is from terra rossa on limestone on the old Chalk Hill, right out the back of Tintara, where Pannell worked as Hardy boss red doctor for years.

And the grenache came off Blewitt Springs sands. It's soil as much as maker.

To find another extreme, and I mean extreme in the purest sense of extreme, like exquisitely beautifully extreme, as all these glories are, I wallowed awhile in the 2006 reds of Doug Govan, publican of the legendary Victory Hotel on Sellicks Hill. His vineyard, whipped by sea breezes, and parked in the dolomite and schist of the Front Hills, gives wines more spritely and athletic. Winsome. Lissom. Again, his grenache was a law unto itself.

We were tasting Govan's wine where it's made, at the other extreme of the Vales, away back up at Justin McNamee's Samuel's Gorge, perched above the Onkaparinga beside Chapel Hill. Govan



plays a sort of securing ground crew to McNamee's space cadet: the exquisite Samuel's Gorge stuff more akin to those from over the ridge at Yangarra.

"I make wine out there," McNamee said, pointing through the window at his wonky old slate fermenters.

"I analyse it here," waving his arms towards the laboratory glassware mounted on the wall, "and I drink it through there," pointing again, at his tasting room, which came fitted with a brace of 200-tonne olive presses, so it looks rather like a Dominican torture chamber.

Again, wines of dramatic, beautiful character and extreme individualism.

"Expression of geology", he yelled to the breeze. "Wild."

So. 2006? McLaren Vale? Start with any of the above and you're sweet. Don't hold your breath waiting for the bulk savvy b to find its labels. And

watch for the new cadenzias, the grenache-based blends made annually by the most adventurous Vales vintners.

This new-wave inner sanctum of true believers will give the Barossa hell. Prepare for the Battle of Grenache.

□ **The best of McLaren Vale's 2006 grenaches will find their way into bottles sporting the name "Cadenzia" on the labels.**

Last year, a dozen wineries bottled grenache-driven wines under the Cadenzia project, Yangarra Estate among them. Also included were Classic McLaren Wines, Dog Ridge Vineyard, Foggo Wines, Gemtree and Penny's Hill. More will join the project this vintage.

Go to www.mclarenvale.info/cadenzia/ for more information.



Right, consultant winemaker Steve Pannell and, below, winemaker Peter Fraser.

