

THE SPARKLING ISLE

Tasmania produces a mere half of one per cent of all Australian wine, yet the island state is increasingly being seen as a world-class location for sparkling wine. Stephen Quinn reports.

The island of Tasmania, Australia's southernmost state, was discovered by Dutch explorer Abel Janszoon Tasman in November 1642. Tasman, who is also credited as having discovered New Zealand and Fiji, is said to have been driven onto the west coast by a storm. His ship, the *Heemskerck*, gave its name to Tasmania's first modern winery, founded 124 years later, while his middle name lives on in the successful Jansz sparkling wine produced there.

Tasmania was one of the first Australian regions to be planted with vines, and a bottle of Tasmanian wine was presented at a Paris exhibition in 1848, a few years before wines from the Hunter Valley were to win acclaim at a similar Parisian event. Despite the auspicious beginning, Tasmanian winemaking languished for more than a century, until Graham Wiltshire established the Heemskirk vineyard in 1966.

Wiltshire's first commercial release was a 1976 Cabernet Sauvignon, but he realised the cool climate was ideal for sparkling wine. After a period of experimentation, Heemskirk formed a joint venture with Champagne house Louis Roederer in 1987. The relationship wasn't an easy one and Wiltshire relinquished control in 1992; the business was acquired by Yalumba six years later, Roederer deciding that California was an easier place.

An industry emerges

One of the challenges Roederer had faced was that while parts of Tasmania had heat summation statistics that seemed similar to Burgundy, the island has a range of microclimates that affect ripening, and yields which proved to be lower than in Champagne.

One person who took the trouble of studying these microclimates carefully was Dr Andrew Pirie, who moved to Tasmania with his late brother David in 1973, two years after they had taken a European trip. Pirie had noticed that the Old World's best vineyards generally came from cool climates, unlike much of the New World's viticulture at the time. After exploring the island, he established Pipers Brook in 1974;



his Chardonnay, Pinot Noirs and Rieslings first caught the attention of Australian, and then overseas, critics.

The fact that these modern pioneers only began to produce wine in the 1970s helps to explain why most of Tasmania's vines are under two decades old and the total area under vines in 2014 was only 1,514 ha. Production is rising, but can vary widely from one year to the next. The five-year average crop of 7,500 tonnes published by Wine Tasmania conceals crops of 11,000 in 2013 and just 6,500 in 2014, a particularly tricky harvest. However, Ed Carr, group sparkling winemaker at Accolade Wines since 1994, and revered in Australia as a pioneer of sparkling wine, reckons that the total could be closer to 10,000 tonnes in two to three years because of recent plantings.

At about 44%, Pinot Noir is the most planted grape in the state, followed by Chardonnay at 23%. Two decades ago, it was the Chardonnay that had the lion's share of the vineyards, and the shift to the black Burgundian grape reflects the way in which sparkling wine has become fundamental to the business of the Tasmanian wine industry.

Rene Bezemer, chief winemaker at Pipers Brook, says that island's climate creates "a perfect environment for the production of sparkling wines. The fruit retains naturally high acidity [and] lower sugar accumulation yet early flavour ripeness." More than one in three bottles produced in Tasmania is now premium fizz. Yet back in the 1990s, notes local expert, Mark Smith, most Tasmanian winemakers focused on table wines, and only made sparkling "with fruit

surplus to table wine requirements".

The shift to sparkling wine helps to explain how, while Tasmania produces only half of 1% of all the wine made in Australia, it sells 6% of the ultra-premium end of the market. As Carr says, "Tasmania has become very noticed globally; Tasmanian sparkling is in the Australian media all the time." He believes Tasmanian sparkling has the potential to equal Champagne in terms of quality and price. The price of his wine Arras, which starts at A\$40.00 (\$33.50) and moves to A\$120.00 for the Grand Vintage, is "pretty similar to grand marque French" he says. "We are in the same ballpark and making reasonable returns at those prices."

Carr's confidence is supported by the naming of 2005 Arras Grand Vintage as Australian Sparkling Wine of the Year at the 2014 International Wine Challenge, and the award of four gold medals at the inaugural champagne and sparkling wine world championships organised by the acknowledged Champagne expert Tom Stevenson.

Pricing issues

Sheralee Davies, CEO of Wine Tasmania, agrees that: "Prices are higher on average than other Australian wines due to the quality and quantity of Tasmanian wine, but if we take a global view of the market place, I believe Tasmanian wines are generally underpriced."

Tasmania's vineyards certainly have little difficulty selling their wines and many do not even ship them to the mainland - only 240 kilometres to the north - because, thanks to boom-



Ed Carr, group sparkling winemaker at Accolade Wines

ing tourism, everything they make goes to local restaurants, or is sold during wine festivals and at the cellar door. Fewer than 10% of vineyards export, but that could change.

Tasmania has a stable climate and can produce good fruit each year, which is not always the case in places like the UK, another focus of recent sparkling winemaking investment, says Carr. "Tasmanian wine is only going to get stronger. Demand is certainly there and winemaking is well sorted." He expects more planting of vines and notes "no shortage of suitable vineyard land and plenty of water".

Davies points out that while volumes are still "indeed very small" she sees "significant investment and expansion". The sector is continuing to experience market-led growth - and interest from companies like Kreglinger which bought Piper's Brook in 2001. Founded in Belgium and originally devoted to leather, wool and sheepskin, the firm now also produces wines like the Kreglinger sparkling rosé which was described by Australian wine guru James Halliday as one of the best he had ever encountered

The regions

The island has seven sub-regions, with vines concentrated in the eastern half of the island because the western half is too wet and windy. Of these, the Tamar Valley in the north, home to Launceston, the second biggest city after the capital Hobart, is by far the biggest, producing around 40% of the state's grapes. Its climate is similar to that of Burgundy's Côte d'Or, experiencing slightly warmer average temperatures than the more coastal Pipers Brook and Pipers River regions, even though the latter is only 35 kilometres to the east. According to local expert Mark Smith, "Grapes generally mature about 10 days earlier with slightly higher yields from the vineyards in the Tamar region. Vines experience a long slow ripening and March tends,

on average, to be the driest month." The low yields resulting from limited rainfall during the ripening period helps add to the body of the wines.

Winemakers and would-be winemakers in Tasmania face a similar challenge to their counterparts in Champagne: should they make single vineyard wines, or should they blend grapes from different areas?

After a quarter century at the company at Pipers Brook, Bezemer, the winery's chief winemaker says that the way Piper's Brook 200 ha of vineyards are spread across the north coast of Tasmania offers a great advantage. "Each site is different from the next. The subtle differences in climatic conditions between sites and between vines [is] part of the complex answer to the production of cool climate wines that we strive for."

Today grapes from those vineyards go into blends but over the past few years his team had identified potential single site vineyards and planned to bring individual vineyard Pinot Noir to the top layer of the portfolio.

The Tasmanian industry today boasts 230 individual vineyards, 160 licensed wine producers and 90 cellar door outlets. As these numbers suggest, it is a blend of family-owned boutique operations and big companies. Some of the better-known boutiques include Delamere, Goaty Hill, Resolution Vineyard, Holm Oak, Pooley and Sinapius.

Most of the big players on the mainland have invested in Tasmania. Treasury Wines Estates owns the Heemskerk and Abel's Tempest labels and has purchased established vineyards in recent years. Accolade Wines owns Bay of Fires and House of Arras, while Brown Brothers control Tamar Ridge and Devil's Corner, and McWilliams has the Last Horizon. South Australians Yalumba and the Hill Smith Family Vineyards own Dalrymple and Jansz, Grant Burge from the Barossa Valley makes his Helene sparkling wine in Tasmania, and Shaw+Smith released its first wines last year under the Tolpuddle Vineyard label.

Dr Andrew Pirie's latest project is a small-scale but super-premium vintage sparkling wine venture called Apogee in the Pipers Brook district, 500m to the east of the Clover Hill Vineyard, another of Tasmania's most famous sparkling wine brands. Just two hectares in size, the vineyard is about the same size as an plot

THE MAJORITY OF TASMANIA'S GRAPES ARE GROWN IN:

- the Tamar Valley wine growing area, which produces approximately 40%
- the East Coast wine growing area, which produces approximately 20%
- the North East (Pipers River) wine growing area, which produces approximately 19%
- the Coal River Valley wine growing area, which produces approximately 13%
- The remaining wine growing areas, including the Derwent Valley, North West and the Huon/Channel, contributed approximately 9% to the total harvest in 2013.

Cool climate grape varieties most common in the state are:

- Pinot Noir - 44% (used for both table and sparkling wine)
- Chardonnay - 23% (used for both table and sparkling wine)
- Sauvignon Blanc - 12%
- Pinot Gris - 11%
- Riesling - 5%
- Other varieties include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Gewürztraminer.

SOURCE: WINE TASMANIA

of vines in Champagne - and has already been named Tasmanian vineyard of the year. "According to the data we've collected, our average temperature here during the growing season is 14.5°C, which puts us at about the middle of the range for Champagne," Pirie says. He is able to ripen fruit to sparkling wine maturity in early April. "That confirms us as a high quality sparkling wine site," he told the audience at an open day at his vineyard.

Earlier this year the Tasmanian government and Wine Tasmania published The wine industry in Tasmania: A guide for investors. Davies of Wine Tasmania highlighted the industry's potential for 'significant expansion'. "Our natural advantages are complemented by land affordability, secure water access, bio-security and, particularly important, a single identity (Geographic Indication) and unity under the Tasmanian Brand." The island's wines have come a very long way in the last four decades; the next four seem likely to hold even more promise. ■