

WYNNS COMES OUT TO THE WORLD

After a gap of 15 years, an Australian icon is once again moving into international markets. Dr Stephen Quinn visited Wynns Coonawarra Estate in the famous red soil region of South Australia to talk about strategies.

Wynns Coonawarra Estate



Wynns Black Label Cabernet Sauvignon, which has been produced for more than half a century, is one of Australia's most treasured wines, always in the top 10 most-celared labels in the country. Wynns is now focusing on telling the world about its tradition and quality.

Despite its long history, Wynns Coonawarra Estate remains one of the least bombastic of companies, receiving major awards but not boasting about them. While that underplayed approach continues, the company is now focusing sales in fine wine markets around key world markets after a 15-year hiatus, when Wynns only sold domestically.

Coonawarra

Only the Margaret River in Western Australia wins more awards than Coonawarra, the home of Wynns, as a proportion of wine made. But Margaret River's wines come from small producers and are seldom sold outside Australia. Because of its size, Wynns is one of the few Australian wine "names" capable of performing in a global arena. Wynns is the largest single-vineyard holder in Coonawarra. Its 950

ha cover about 70% of the famous terra rossa soil, ideal for making red wine.

Simon Morton, the chief marketing officer for Treasury Wine Estates, which owns Wynns, says it's time to return to the fine wine markets of the world: the UK, Hong Kong, Canada and the US. "We have targeted key markets where we can take a unique Australia brand to an international venue. We think our wines will have a connection with people who are used to buying old-world wines." Wynns adopts a different approach for each country. "We know what the brand stands for and the story we want to tell - the quality of the terroir, and Coonawarra's history and uniqueness. We emphasise different elements of the story depending on each market." In the US, he says, that means focusing on Cabernet and what that means to Americans. "In Hong Kong we take an educational perspective and talk about Coonawarra's terroir and the wines that come from it. We stick with the fine wine end of the market." Morton said this was "not a one-year effort" but a long-term investment strategy. "We know it's going to take time. We just need to be patient and tell our story to the world."

In some respects, the success of Australian

wine globally over the past 30 years could be the germ that produced its current weakness. Success in the 1980s and 1990s was on the back of being different to the old world. Australia made wines that were fun, uncomplicated, easy to understand and above all great value. The softness of the wines introduced new consumers, and the use of varietal labels rather than appellations made it easier for people around the world to understand what they were drinking. Then other producers - new and old world - copied this "innovation". Fluctuating currency exchanges and a strong Australian dollar produced big challenges for the Australian wine business.

In the US, Wynns focuses on selling Black Label wines for about \$30.00, which is "rarefied air", as Morton noted, for Australian wines, which typically sell for under \$10.00. "We're educating people about the intrinsic worth of Australian fine wine and why they're worth paying \$30.00 for." Morton said Wynns was experiencing "strong growth" in Canada. "We've positioned our wines at a higher price point than the majority of Australian wine [there]." He was reluctant to provide production numbers for Black Label wines because of vintage fluctuations. "In bad years production can be 50% less than in good years."

The company believes its greatest assets are its heritage - they founded the industry in the Coonawarra - plus the wine quality and the personalities of the current custodians. For that reason, viticulturalists are paired with winemakers at international Wynnsday events, which take place on the first Wednesday of August, when the new vintage collection is released. These events tend to be centred on Cabernet Sauvignon. Chief winemaker Sue Hodder believes Wynns has "some of the most important Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards in Australia and it's important to give them some recognition."

Typically Wynns' wines are represented by fine wine distributors in key markets that also handle other iconic wineries, such as

those from Bordeaux. “We re-launched Wynns in Hong Kong in 2003, in quite a big splash, because Hong Kong is such an influential market across Asia,” Morton said. “We also went to Canada because Wynns has always had a good following in that country.” Wynns returned to the US in 2003, and the UK in 2004, where Bibendum represents Wynns in both the on- and off-trade.

In recent years Wynns has introduced several new wine collections. One group has been named after V&A Lane, the road that dissects the region east-west and divides it roughly in half. Winemaker Sarah Pidgeon sees V&A as a vehicle for experimentation and a way to reflect the wide range of vintages in Coonawarra.

Long heritage

The significance of Wynns is that it started the wine industry in the Coonawarra, one of Australia’s most premium areas. John Riddoch of Scotland bought 700 square kilometres in 1861 and within two decades “blockers” – people who bought four-ha blocks from Riddoch – were planting grapes. In 1891 Riddoch built a winery that remains the centre of the Wynns Coonawarra Estate.

Samuel Wynn, a Melbourne-based winemaker, bought the property in 1951. His son David was the first Australian to use the word ‘Estate’ to indicate that what was in the bottle came from a particular place. Two years later David Wynn commissioned artist Richard Beck to produce a woodcut of the winery façade. That image has appeared on every label since, making it one of Australia’s most recognisable logos. Wynns’ success attracted attention and by the late 1960s most of the major wine groups had purchased terra rossa, or red soil.

Wynns stopped selling its wines around the globe from the late 1990s until a year ago, mostly because of different ownership and changing management direction. Its wines have only been sold in Australia for the past 15 years.

Those 15 years gave Wynns the chance to



Sue Hodder, chief winemaker

instigate major vineyard renovation programs. Allen Jenkins, senior viticulturist at Wynns for two decades, said his company had most of the best vines in the Coonawarra, mostly on the famous terra rossa. Chief winemaker Sue Hodder said, “We share varieties, history and passion [with Bordeaux] but we do not strive to make Bordeaux wines, just as they do not want to make Coonawarra.”

The region mostly produces red wine – 90% of the 5,600 ha consist of red grapes. Half of the red Wynns makes is Cabernet Sauvignon, with their old Cabernet planted on the Johnson block in 1953. Summer heat can be intense, so Jenkins ensures that vine canopies are designed to protect the grapes. “Each bunch gets a hat,” he jokes.

Wynns uses a combination of technology and human skill to choose when to pick. A technology known as plant cell density or PCD determines optimum ripeness. Vines are photographed from the air and PCD locates ripe areas. This information is fed into picking machines and these devices only pick ripe grapes, over time passing through a site several times.

The human touch is also involved. Staff taste grapes two or three times a day as the time to pick arrives. PCD is also employed to help vines. If a PCD survey shows low vigour in a specific area of a vineyard, viticulturist use that information to restore those vines. Sensors in the vineyard detect changes in temperature, moisture and wind speeds – the things that cause mildew, and send alerts. Staff can then protect individual vines, reducing the need to spray entire vineyards. This means less money is spent on chemicals and provides options for more organic methods of grape growing.

By 2004 Wynns was the largest single landholder in the Coonawarra region. That year Wynns also celebrated half a century of its Black Label Cabernet Sauvignon. And now, 10 years later, Wynns is taking an important part of Australia’s wine heritage to the world. ■



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