

On solid rock, *sacred ground*

WORDS DAN TRAUCKI

Until the mid-1990s very few people outside of South Australia had heard of McLaren Vale as a winegrowing region. However today, around the world, it is one of Australia's better-known wine regions. This fame is partly down to the perennial stalwarts such as d'Arenberg and Kay Brothers, and in part to the growing number of boutique-quality wineries in the region, now numbering about 100.

It is also due, to quite an extent, to the

excellent marketing and promotion of the region. To this end the committee of the ongoing Geology of the McLaren Vale Wine Region map project, while a scientific endeavour, could and probably will have longer-term marketing applications to help advance McLaren Vale in the future.

At the Wirra Wirra 'Ringing of the Bell' in early February, which officially launches the local vintage, the McLaren Vale Geological Project panel hosted the annual McLaren

Vale Districts Tasting Tutorial. We were updated about the current and ongoing research related to the project and sampled an indicative Shiraz from five districts.

The project has been running since 2010 and aims to highlight and showcase the unique geology of the region. The group has drawn up profiles of the geology of the whole region and identified 19 different sub-districts/structures which they have classified as Distinct Districts. "These



Photo: McLaren Vale Grape Wine & Tourism Association.

districts take into account not only geology but also the effects of topography, elevation and climate,” they say.

“McLaren Vale is one of the most geologically diverse wine regions in the world. More than 40 unique geological units are present in the region, ranging in age from less than 25,000 years to over 650 million years.”

The panel had obtained 2022 vintage Shiraz samples from as many producers as possible within each of the Distinct Districts as

identified on the geological map. The samples from within each district were then blind-judged by a panel of winemakers and viticulturists. All of the samples, other than those deemed to be atypical (too much oak, picked too ripe or too thin) were then blended together to create a final district sample. As in previous years, they had very few rejects (usually due to high alcohol from late picking).

Having created as many district blends as possible, the tasting group then select the five

districts they consider to be the most uniquely expressive, for use in the tutorial. The five wines we tasted were each a representational sample of the Shiraz from its specific geological district.

There is an appreciable difference in the flavours and characters of the wines from the different districts. For example, the tightest, most austere wine that most needed cellaring to show at its best, was from District 10. The most elegant and forward/ready to drink wine was from District 16.

This districts represented this year were:

District 3: Very appealing, heaps of intense red fruit, less complex, big structured but with less tannins – soft, velvety tannins. A blend of seven wines.

District 9: Tighter, angular, dark fruit with dried herbs, hints of olives and iodine characters. Less primary fruit, but lingers for ages. A blend of five wines.

District 10: Red and blue fruit, medium-bodied with long fruity tannins. Quite textural, very attractive. Will be slow in ageing. A blend of 10 wines.

District 12: Lifted florals, herbaceous edge with a hint of sour cherries and aniseed. Well balanced, plenty of tannins, sumptuous length. A blend of 12 wines.

District 16: Perfumed with lifted pepper. Quite open, cherries and red jubes, low tannins. A beautiful, elegant wine; not a long-term keeper. A blend of five wines.

Needless to say, the more samples in a district blend, the more representative of the district the presented blend is.

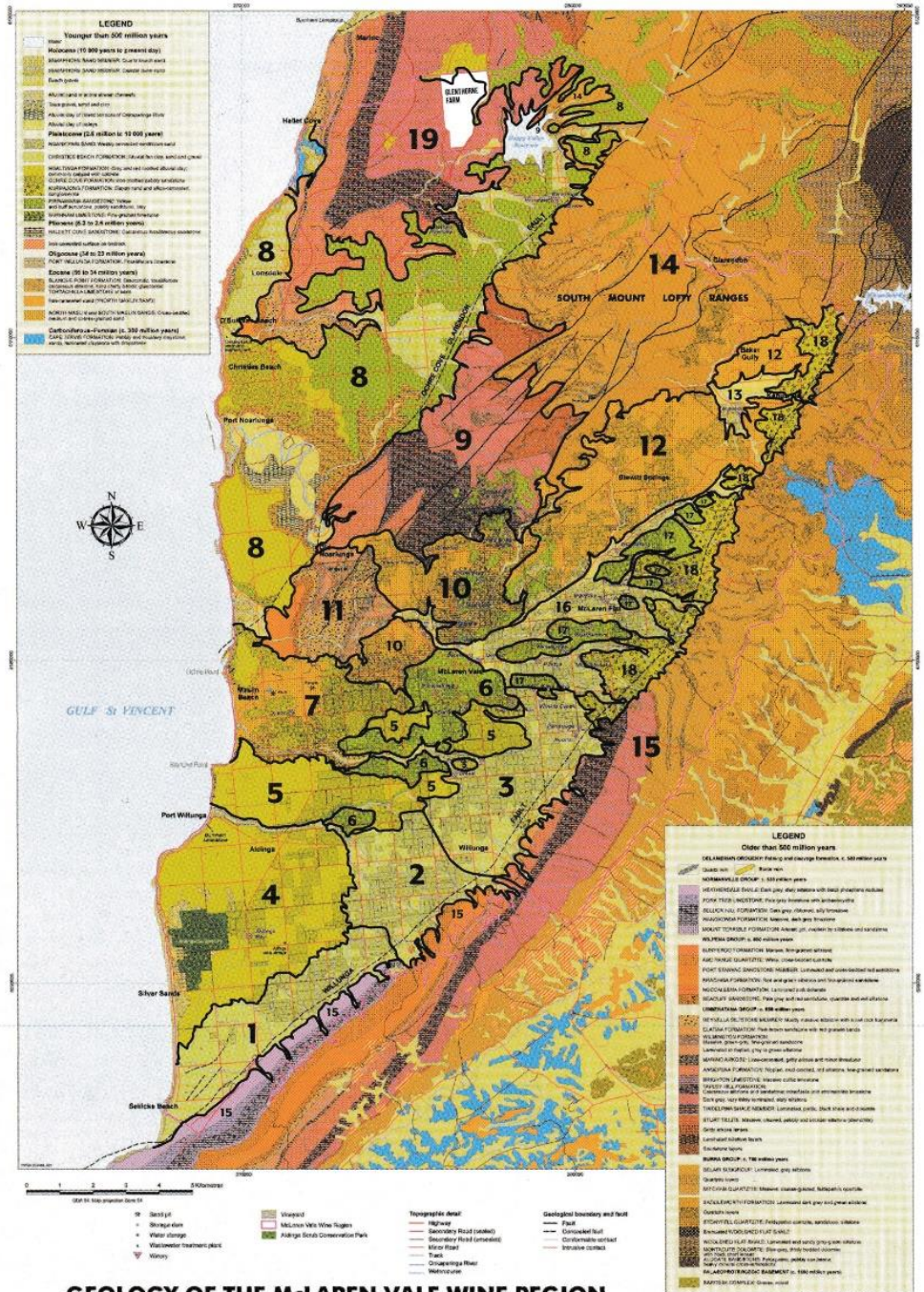
All the samples were clean and quite expressive, with the main differences between them being in the tannin levels and structure, with some degree of difference in the fruit intensity of the wines.

Committee member Chester Osborn from d'Arenberg said, "Every single year we can see both the similarities and differences between the districts represented in these samples – it is very enlightening."

Each wine that had been used in a district blend was available for tasting after the tutorial, so attendees could judge for themselves as to the similarity of individual wines from within the one district.

There has been some criticism over the years about having 19 different geological districts in the one wine region, with some people considering the model to be far too complex. However, the committee obviously disagrees and to put this matter into context, they point out that the region of Volnay within Burgundy has 29 communes for the approximately 250 hectares of Pinot Noir they produce. In comparison, McLaren Vale has 19 districts covering the 1,750 hectares of Shiraz (out of 7,500 hectares planted to vines), making it sound quite reasonable.

The project group has come up with names for all 19 districts but are not releasing them yet as it is still a work in progress, with some



GEOLOGY OF THE McLAREN VALE WINE REGION

of the names currently being used by local wineries. The final listing has to be approved by the McLaren Vale Grape Wine & Tourism Association before being published or officially adopted.

This is a sterling effort: unique, in-depth and long term, but what will it achieve? The aim over time is to identify sub-regional characteristics to better work with the grapes/wines that a particular district produces. It is a serious effort to understand the impact the geology of the district has on the flavour and wine style of their Shiraz. So,

in the long run, McLaren Vale Shiraz will be much more understandable/explainable to wine consumers around the world, which will assist in further raising the awareness and popularity of the regional jewel in the crown.

One day we might see official distinct districts such as, let's say, 'Seaview' or 'Blewitt Springs' on McLaren Vale Shiraz labels, like we see 'Watervale' on Clare Riesling. ♦

Dan Traucki is a wine journalist and a wine industry consultant. You can contact Dan at dan@wineassist.com.au