

Few winemakers are confronting climate breakdown as fast and with as much finesse as the South Australian innovators of McLaren Vale, where sustainability is poured into each and every glass.

BY REBECCA FOREMAN

A 45-minute motorway drive south of Adelaide airport is the heart of McLaren Vale, 7,438 hectares of lush coastal vineyards.

This part of South Australia is known for bold, rich shiraz, but it is also one of the country's most progressive and environmentally sustainable growing regions, producing wines crafted from classic and emerging grape varieties.

McLaren Vale leads the way in terms of organic practices, water management and climate-appropriate plantings. The topography helps. The region is surrounded by a horseshoe of hills, the Mount Lofty Ranges, and pierced by a valley, which runs to the Gulf St Vincent. Temperatures rarely hit extreme highs or lows, meaning yields tend to be excellent.

I have come to McLaren Vale to visit some of its green wineries, meet the owners and find out how they are preparing for climate breakdown while acting as the designated driver for my wine-loving husband.

We begin at d'Arenberg, a name familiar to many wine aficionados. The largest biodynamic certified grower of wine grapes in Australia, d'Arenberg is in the centre of McLaren Vale. It is also home to the d'Arenberg Cube, a five-storey multi-use building that rises above the mourvèdre vines and includes the Singapore Circus restaurant (head chef Jamie Steele grew up in the Lion City and found inspiration in its hawker centres for his dishes), a wine tasting room and the Alternate Realities Museum.

"McLaren Vale is one of the most sustainable wine regions in Australia," confirms d'Arenberg owner, Chester Osborn. "At least 80 per cent sustainable – maybe not certified or registered, but certainly practising sustainability."

And what does biodynamic farming entail, exactly? I've read that lunar cycles and cow horns are somehow important.

"Biodynamic doesn't have to be moon



DESTINATION

Vine tuning

related, but there are cow horns with poo involved," answers Osborn. "It's all about microflora – it becomes a living breathing soil and breaks carbon down."

Osborn also relies on sheep agistment (having livestock graze on the property), solar power and natural disease control to achieve a balance between environmental sustainability and cutting-edge production techniques.

Ten kilometres east of d'Arenberg is Gemtree Wines, which runs a "Being Biodynamic" tour that starts in its cellar door tasting room, where visitors swirl, smell, sip and spit award-winning wines from the small-batch range.

We are then guided through the farming, grape-growing and winemaking processes, which have earned Gemtree medals for sustainable practice at the Best of Wine Tourism Awards.

At the Biodynamic Hut, guests discover how the philosophy is applied in the fields: how sheep replace pesticides to keep weeds under control; how ground quartz prevents fungal infections,

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negating the need for chemical fungicides; and how those cow horns, stuffed with manure, restore carbon to the soil.

At tour's end, our bellies full of cheese and hope for a better world, we leave with a case of first-release albariño and head for Paxton Wines, which is just off the main Victor Harbor Road.

Paxton has pioneered organic grape growing and wine production since 2011. At a tasting in its solar-powered cellar door – a renovated sheep-shearing shed with a vaulted ceiling and seating around a cosy fireplace – we learn that the winery uses only grapes grown on its McLaren Vale estate, which is irrigated with recycled water.

Paxton is another producer that manages its grapes biodynamically, with a focus on promoting healthy, living soils through the use of natural compost preparation and the removal of synthetic fertilisers. Its bottles are now made of lightweight glass, reducing its carbon footprint in glass production and freight by up to 30 per cent. The bottle labels are made from paper produced from sugar-cane waste and recycled cardboard is used for wine cartons.

A 10-minute drive south of Paxton Wines is the Hither & Yon cellar door, housed in the whitewashed old butcher's shop on Willunga High Street. It is here I meet Malcolm Leask.



McLaren Vale, South Australia.
Picture: McLaren Vale Grape
Wine & Tourism Association



Chester Osborn, in front of the
d'Arenberg Cube at his d'Arenberg
winery, in McLaren Vale.

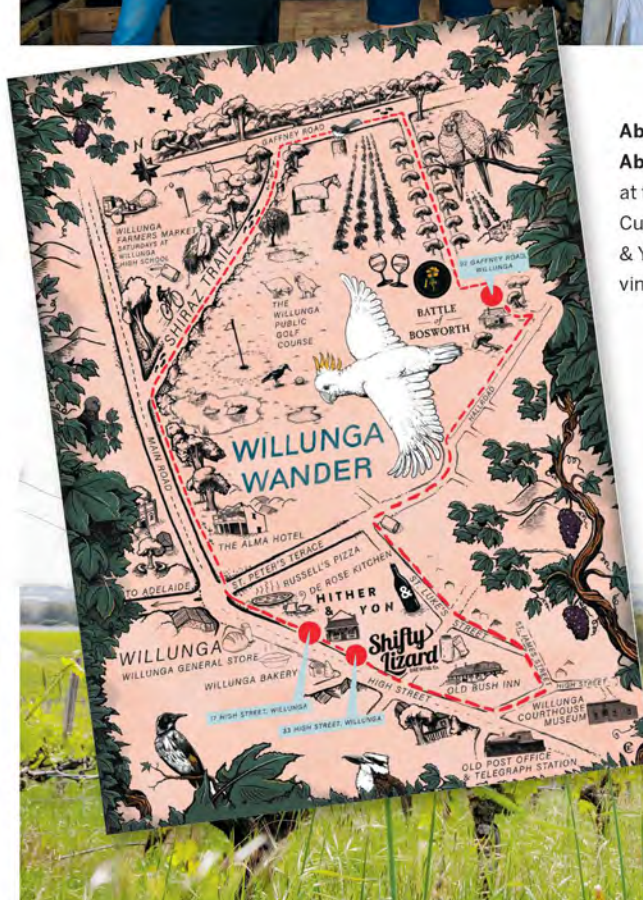


He and his brother, Richard, are producers of highly regarded, small-batch wines (Hither & Yon's 2021 Aglianico won the McLaren Vale's Best Wine of Show 2022 award), often releasing innovative varieties. Hither & Yon was the first wine brand to be certified carbon neutral in South Australia.

"We care about our soil – so much so that we didn't want [to locate] the cellar door at our winery, [to avoid] cars driving around our vines and producing emissions," says Leask. "We put our focus on improving our wine through the soil by using a regenerative agriculture model of farming, neither organic nor biodynamic, but following nature's rhythm."

The brothers have partnered with nearby Gemtree, which produces their wine, thus entrusting their grapes to like-minded artisans who operate with the lightest of touches.

"Everything we do is within a small radius, which keeps us super-efficient," says Leask. "Most of the region is [sustainability-minded]. It's what we all get



Above left: Gemtree Wines hosts a "Being Biodynamic" tour.
Above right: wine and food, including chilli crab,
at the Singapore Circus restaurant in the d'Arenberg
Cube. **Left:** a walking map of Willunga from Hither
& Yon. **Below:** Malcolm Leask at his Hither & Yon
vineyard. **Right:** Hither & Yon's malbec 2021.



out of bed for every day. We understand, more than anyone, that this region is a beautiful, rare part of the planet [...] and we must look after it.

“It’s our identity, and what we want for the future generations.”

I remember Leask’s words as we finish the day with a swim in the crisp waters off Aldinga beach, a 10-minute drive west of his cellar door.

The following day we visit the small and nimble Battle of Bosworth, producer of organically grown and certified wines from family-owned vineyards since 1999 and the first to be certified organic in the area.

According to the website, Joch Bosworth, who owns the winery with partner Louise Hemsley-Smith, both of whom live in the stone homestead next door, experiments but remains true to traditional vinification: minimal, natural processing combined with organic, sustainable viticulture. One of his wines is even named Puritan, to reflect the fact it’s fresh, unoaked and preservative-free.

“Times have certainly changed,” says Bosworth. “I remember when it was seen as a negative to have ‘organic’ written on your label, largely due to them being poorly made. It’s different now, farmers are now viticulturalists and winemakers – they know how to make great-tasting organic wine and people are interested in natural products. As the organic wine and biodynamic producers become more serious, more people collaborate with real passion and skills.

“Wine evolves.”

As does beer. Bosworth also makes Battle of Bosworth Pale Ale, with barley grown in an organically certified



The family-owned vineyards of organic wine producer Battle of Bosworth.

paddock in front of the vineyard. He sells the malt-driven, lightly hopped beer to just three local outlets: Victory Hotel (in Sellicks Hill); The Salopian Inn (Main Road, McLaren Vale); and Star of Greece (Port Willunga).

There are an estimated 160 vineyards and almost 100 cellar doors in McLaren Vale and we’ve just scratched the surface, but there is one more that I want to see before leaving the region.

Angove Family Winemakers is among the leaders in organic and biodynamic viticulture. Minivans full of visitors arrive at its busy cellar door to partake in a variety of tasting options, from single

vineyard wines to award-winning spirits, followed by a meal in the restaurant.

A proper tasting here takes more than an hour and there are plenty of tables and barrels repurposed as seating along the cellar door’s veranda to relax at while doing so. The views are of Angove’s organic, biodynamic Warboys Vineyard and the verdant hills that border it.

“For us, organics is simply about treating the soil as best as we possibly can, no artificial herbicides, pesticides or fertilisers,” says Richard Angove, who runs the fifth-generation family-owned business. “If we treat the soil well, we grow grapes with the best flavour and

so hopefully our wines taste pure and reflect the place they are grown.

“Weed control is the biggest challenge in organics but we have totally changed our mindset about weeds. We like them as they promote biodiversity within the vineyard and return vital nitrogen back to the soil for vine nutritional health.”

Angove’s production facilities are in Renmark, a small town 300km east of McLaren Vale, and it is there that it also distils spirits, including Blind Tiger Organic Gin. The label’s brandy is produced in old copper pot stills from a base of freshly made wine – including pressings that would otherwise go to waste – and by using the same double distillation techniques Angove’s great-grandfather researched during a trip to Cognac, France, in 1925.

Everywhere you look, McLaren Vale’s wine producers are second-guessing what a chaotic future has in store for them.

“All wine regions are being affected by climate change, but McLaren Vale has been quick to pivot, and everyone here has started working on future proofing these vines,” says Samantha Davidson, trade marketing manager at the McLaren Vale Grape Wine & Tourism Association.

“Other regions haven’t been able to do that because they might be so steeped in tradition or scared of change, but McLaren Vale is a hive of talented people who aren’t afraid of pushing boundaries, with the vast majority being incredibly in touch with the environment.

“We all know the wealth of what we have to work with here – amazing fruit, ancient soil, incredible aspects, proximity to the ocean plays a massive part, and the people – it’s a winemaker’s playground.” ■

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