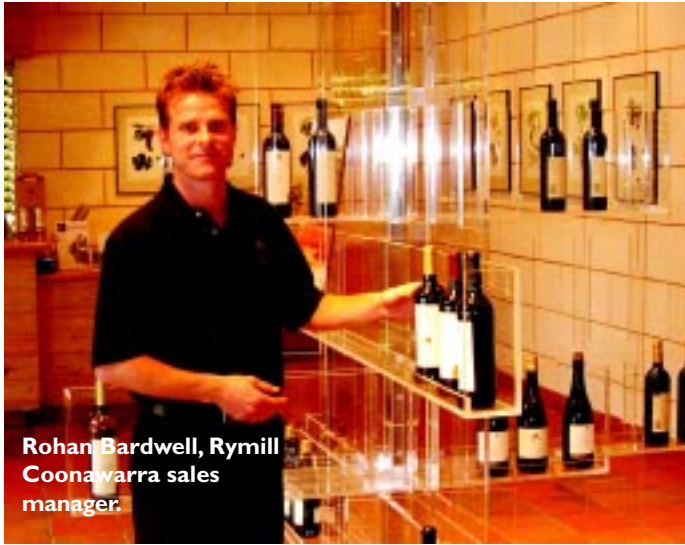




Age, value, structure



Rohan Bardwell, Rymill Coonawarra sales manager.

Kelvin King looks at the wines of Rymill Coonawarra, the epitome of terra rossa country in South Australia's Limestone Coast region

John Innes, winemaker for Rymill Coonawarra, doesn't exactly walk around chanting "age, value, structure" as a mantra. But that's very much the controlling philosophy for this South Australian producer whose wines sell globally. And particularly so for its flagship cabernet sauvignon.

Innes believes that the strong demand for Australian reds, both at home and in export markets, means that many are being consumed at a quite youthful age.

With the full backing of the Rymill family, Innes decided to hold the company's reds much longer than usual, so that when they were released they would be starting to show their true character. This means they can be enjoyed much more fully now or cellared for even further enhancement.

This is particularly so for the Rymill Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon, the company's flagship, which is not released to market until it is at least four years old.

That policy adds significantly to production costs, of course, but another Rymill Coonawarra policy is to keep prices at reasonable levels.

"John believes that being cool-climate reds, they're fairly right in structure when they're youthful," said Rohan Bardwell, the company's sales manager (and a wine industry veteran, despite his age), suggesting that the cabernet sauvignon at about two years tends to dominate food rather than balance with it. "Our maturation approach ensures the wines combine better with food."

Cabernet sauvignon accounts for about 65 per cent of Rymill Coonawarra's plantings, just a little higher than the region's varietal split.

This cab sauv's time in oak enhances its fruit characteristics, delivering a deep fruit flavour, richness and tannin structure. You

can feel that it's ready to drink immediately, although a few years' cellaring are said to pay dividends.

With most people, myself included apart from the small cellar of "mustn't-be-tempted-yets", drinking wine within a week or two of purchase (a vast percentage is consumed within 24 hours), it's a delight to discover a red wine with real depth that can be got into straight away.

The maturation program leads to another Rymill policy: the winery doesn't put its wines to show. "A lot of wines are being judged when they are very young," said Bardwell. "John has always felt the time to judge a wine is when you have it at dinner."

Yet another Rymill Coonawarra characteristic is the high proportion of French oak used. This is in line with the "deliver when mature" concept; a higher proportion of American oak tends to give a wine more approachability when young.

The shiraz, for instance, spends 20 months in a combination of 60 per cent French and 40 per cent American oak, of which only a small proportion are new barrels; the remainder are two to seven years old.

The shiraz from the Riddoch Run vineyards — the Rymill Coonawarra estate from which all fruit is sourced — is harvested from vines growing in very shallow soil. This reduces crop yields but produces intense, spicy, blackcurrant and peppery flavours which are further enhanced by maturation.

Rymill MC, intriguingly named, is held for 18 months in a combination of one-third new and two-thirds two to six year old French barriques. This wine is a blend of 33 per cent merlot, five per cent cabernet franc and 62 per cent cabernet sauvignon.

The MC is intended to be enjoyed at a younger age. It's adaptable and flexible; it comes as no surprise when Bardwell mentions it is selling very well by the glass in Australia and New Zealand.

In the Riddoch name lies a rich treasure trove of heritage, adventure and true Aussie pluck. John Riddoch was founder of the Coonawarra wine district in the 1890s. His grandson, John Riddoch Rymill, was a 1930s Antarctic explorer of immense achievement. Great-grandson Peter, together with his wife Judy, established the Riddoch Run vineyards in 1974.

Rymill Coonawarra Winery was set up in 1990 and has become popular with tourists for its professionally-run cellar door, easy-access winery and interesting architecture. The life-sized bronze statue of two horses rampant — also featuring as a logo on bottle labels — recognises the Rymill family's interest in horses and their reputation as accomplished equestrians.

Rymill is also becoming better known for its whites, although reds will forever be the portfolio leaders. The Rymill Sauvignon Blanc is one for those who — like me — enjoy grassy, herbaceous "savvies". These piquant aromas sit well with tropical fruit characters on the nose and palate.

ON THE WEB: www.rymill.com.au

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Highfield: flying high

You might not yet be familiar with Highfield Estate, although if you've been in Air New Zealand business class lately you may well have sampled some of this Marlborough producer's premium offers. And thanks partly to another Air New Zealand link — New Zealand's national wine awards, sponsored by the carrier — you're likely to be hearing a lot more about this rapidly evolving brand.

That's because Highfield Estate — whose wines are presented in stately bottles which look really tremendous on the table (when a cynical friend remarks on that, as one did to me, you know this is something special) — performed admirably at the 2004 awards.

Among the accolades was a gold medal for the recently-released 2004 Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc.

A few days later the same wine took a prestigious "blue gold" in the Sydney Top 100 Wine Awards, as did the Highfield Estate 2002 Marlborough Pinot Noir.

"We're delighted our new wines have been recognised by experienced wine judges," said winemaker Alistair Soper. "I'm particularly pleased our pinot noir has been recognised, given the high level of success we have enjoyed with our sauvignon blanc over recent years."

The 2003 Sauvignon Blanc won a gold medal at the 2003 Air New Zealand awards, along with the trophy for champion commercial white wine. It went on to collect further golds at the 2004 Royal New Zealand Easter Show, the 2004 Riverside Wine Competition in California, and the 2004 Christchurch Casino Sauvignon Blanc First Taste Awards.

ON THE WEB:

www.highfield.co.nz

Central Otago pinot noir

A BIG name for an increasingly significant event: a major presenter at the 2005 Central Otago Pinot Noir Celebration, to be held in Queenstown, New Zealand, on January 28-29, will be Jancis Robinson. "Jancis Robinson is regarded as one of the leading wine commentators in the world and it is a huge coup for Central Otago that she has decided to join us for the Celebration," said Duncan Forsyth, the planning committee chairman. "It says a lot about Central Otago's emergence as one of the world's leading pinot regions."

ON THE WEB: www.pinotcelebration.co.nz



Brian McGuigan: icon of Oz wine

He's one of a handful of "living legends" of the Australian wine industry, a key link between the industry's pioneering years and its long-term global future. Nowadays he heads up one of Australia's major producers, the publicly-listed McGuigan Simeon Wines, covering the whole spectrum from mass-market through to niche brands such as Tempus Two.

And while he wants McGuigan Simeon to expand further, that is much more likely to be through organic growth rather than acquisitions. "We're a brand-building company. The best way is to build brands, not buy them. Of course, that takes longer."

Brian McGuigan is proud of the fact that his labels "are sound and in good heart. They're the real thing, not pseudo wineries." McGuigan Simeon wines are backed by heritage and identifiable country, quite probably land that McGuigan himself has had some hand in choosing, developing and even planting.



- Brian McGuigan -

Because, despite being chief executive of a major public company, McGuigan is a hands-on leader who hasn't been afraid to get right into the nitty-gritty, a key reason that he is held in such widespread respect.

He counts among his skills those of winemaker, viticulturist, marketer, communications specialist, ambassador for Australian wines and creator of corporate wealth for shareholders, including himself. He was awarded the Order of Australia in 1988 and has an extraordinary list of other accolades to his credit, including NSW Winemaker of the Year.

In addition to his industry work, he is active in community and charity area. He has also been a leader in developing the Hunter Valley as a tourist area.

McGuigan, who comes from a winemaking family, founded the Wyndham Estate Wine Company at Dalwood in the Hunter in the 1970s. As managing director of the Wyndham Estate Group he built one of the most successful wine companies in Australia, with brands such as Richmond Grove, Montrose, Poets Corner, Craigmoor, Saxonvale and Hunter Estate.

It was during this time that he and wife Fay began to put in leg work developing export sales, a key to the current success of McGuigan Simeon Wines.

Following the sale of Wyndham in 1991, McGuigan set up a new public company which has since become McGuigan Simeon Wines. It's now one of the top grape growers in Australia and the world, while exports are in excess of 50 per cent of total production.

ON THE WEB: www.iconbrands.com.au