

WINEMAKERS IN UNION

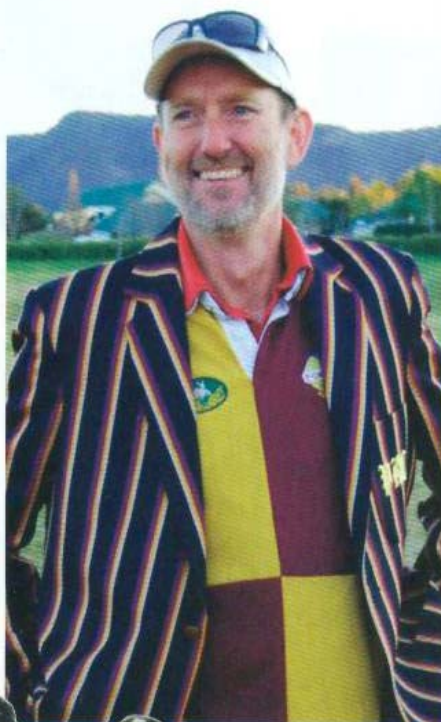


A group of rival Hunter Valley winemakers found a shared love of rugby created a real sense of team spirit. **AMELIA PINSENT** meets them

When I asked who the winemaker was behind the label of the just-released '2007 First XV Shiraz', 15 people stuck their hands in the air. The back label reads like a Who's Who of winemaking in the Hunter Valley. Allandale, Meerea Park, Pepper Tree, Tamburlaine, Thomas, Margan Wines, De Iuliis, Pooles Rock, Tempus Two, Tulloch, Tower Estate, Brokenwood, McGuigan, Scarborough and Tyrrell's... each, without hesitation, donated 20 litres of Shiraz for the inaugural vintage of this wine.

This role call of estates working together on one wine, from one region, is unprecedented. Winemakers the world over tend to be fastidious and often perfectionists – treating their wines with more care and attention than their loved ones. Yet this particular wine is a demonstration of unwavering and inspirational team spirit.

The First XV was the brainchild of the charming Damien Stevens, winemaker at Margan Wines, and coach of the local rugby team the Pokolbin Reds, made up of much of the local winemaking talent. 'The Hospices de Beaune was my inspiration for this wine and we specifically made six double magnums and 50 magnums to be auctioned off for charity,' Stevens explains. He was flooded with offers to contribute wine, and in the end, managed to make 300 litres. 'Most of the wineries involved are gold-medal winners and they source their



Iain Riggs

Team president and chief winemaker, and MD of Brokenwood

'We're a social mob and rugby is close to our hearts. The Pokolbin Reds provides an outlet through the supporters and players that brings the generations together. We have to be realistic – there is no one, iconic, dry Semillon in the world for consumers to worship – but there are so many passionate young winemakers in the Hunter – the mercurial Jim Chatto, the rangey PJ Charteris (winemaker at Brokenwood) and the explosive Andrew Thomas, who are nuts about Sem. With this sort of talent, we will soon have a good chance of driving home that Sem is delicious as a young wine, as well as at a venerable age.'



fruit from some of the most famous and oldest vineyards in the valley,' Stevens adds. 'Bearing in mind the calibre of winemaker involved, the project was always going to be a winner.'

The success of the wine is due in part to the competitive nature of the egos involved. I quizzed all of them on the First XV Shiraz, and each of them admitted that they

had donated some of their best fruit, realising that they couldn't let the side down in the blend – the first magnum auctioned made AS\$1,200 (£500).

The wine is marketed and sold through the Pokolbin Reds, possibly the only rugby team in the world whose post match-celebratory beers are swiftly followed by bottles of old Semillon and mature Shiraz. Passion and wine knowledge are as important as agility and strength in this team. One member, for whom agility is a distant memory, is Rhys Eather. He fined, finished and bottled the wine at Meerea Park with other Reds team members. 'The Hunter Valley was built on wine,' he points out. 'Remember, wine came first, before the restaurants and the hotels.' There was a

PHOTOGRAPHS: IAIN RIGGS/AMELIA PINSENT



Chris Tyrrell,
Tyrrell's Wines
Fly-half/centre

Rhys Eather,
Meerea Park
Coach/lock

Mike De Iuliis,
De Iuliis Wines
Wing

Andrew Margan,
Margan Wines
Lock/flanker

Usher Tinkler,
Pooles Rock
Wing

Usher Tinkler
Winemaker, Poole's Rock,
Wing

'Pokolbin doesn't have a town centre, which is what makes the Pokolbin Reds so fundamental to us. The Reds fill a hole that our wine community is missing, and it is such a small region that everyone knows each other. There is great opportunity here for younger winemakers, and last year I won the Young Winemaker of the Year Award, which opened a load of doors. This might not have been possible without my friendship with the experienced players. If you need anything in the Hunter, all you do is yell out – there is always someone to help you.'



Above: probably the best winemaking rugby team in the world. Back row: John Richards, Chris Tyrrell, Simon Braithwaite, Adam Holmberg, David Barranger, Martin Gray. 3rd row: John Holmes, Jade Charnock, Troy Matthews, Rhys Eather, Phill Griffith, Mike De Iliis. 2nd row: Kevin Dyjach, Alan Rae, Shannon Sutherland, Peter Henderson, Andrew Margan, Dominic Baldry, Adrian Quilty. Front row: Johnny Tyrrell, Josh Cameron, Clinton Pappendorf, Thom Vandstone, Duncan Roberts, Dane Sullivan, Usher Tinkler

hint of defensiveness in Eather's voice. I had previously heard whispers, while tasting in the Barossa, of the Hunter Valley being a 'Disneyland' region. Less than two hours' drive from Sydney, the region attracts enormous numbers of weekenders and foreign tourists – many wine regions would kill for this footfall. The finger-pointing merely galvanises the troops, and they stand a great chance to win a much larger audience with their

inimitable, unoaked Semillon and European-style Shiraz.

The Hunter has a long history of legends in the wine trade, with the great Maurice O'Shea its founding father. Len Evans fell in love with this region – so much so he created Tower Estate. James Halliday helped establish Brokenwood in 1970. There is clearly something contagious about this region and passionate people flock to its benchmark >

Chris Tyrrell

Winemaker (son of Bruce Tyrrell),
Tyrrell's Wines. Fly-half/centre.

'As one of the younger players (with a great side-step), without the Pokolbin Reds I might not have had the opportunity to become such great mates with some of the other winemakers. I want to learn as much as possible, and I learn a lot over a few beers chatting with the rest of the team. It brings us all together. Our lab at Tyrrell's is often used by the winemaking fraternity – it provides the forum for us all to

compare notes and learn all about the different vineyards.'

Bill Sneddon

Winemaker/manager, Allandale
wines. Team manager

'Rugby and wine cement us together. When I started out I used to lean a lot on other people – Karl Stockhausen (another Hunter hero) was incredibly generous with his knowledge and ability. He still comes in regularly and tastes my wines. You can ask anyone here for help and no one would knock you back.'

styles of wines. Eather enthuses: 'Len's understanding of our dry Semillons helped us to celebrate this lower-alcohol style of wine, and our Shirazes rarely cross the 13.5% alcohol threshold.' At a line up of Hunter Valley Shiraz, the style is the antithesis of what is generally expected from Australia. There are controlled alcohol levels here, structured tannins, balanced and fresh acidity underpinning complex, earthy arrays of elegant, briary fruit, more reminiscent of Hermitage than Australia – Evans and Halliday, among others, encouraged this because their reference points were France and not the Barossa Valley.

The Pokolbin Reds knits this small farming community together. The superheroes from the Hunter Valley, Bruce Tyrrell and Iain Riggs, both played an integral part in setting up the team. Under Riggs' guidance, prior to bottling the Semillons, the younger winemakers gather at Brokenwood to taste each others' wines and swap ideas. 'While the "elders" run the tasting lunches, this is

the initiative by the younger crew,' says the burly Mike de Iuliis (a winger): 'Brokenwood is seen as a fun and social place. We have a barbie and start a bit of a forum. We all agree that Semillon is the variety that sets up apart from the rest of Australia. Personally, I don't see lots of different parcels of fruit, as I only pick from one vineyard, so as a small winery I appreciate these comparisons, and it really helps me improve my wines. Semillon is a hard sell internationally. It is so expressive of terroir, it sings of the land it's grown on, but it is these subtleties that create problems with the consumer. To sell Sem, you have to get behind it and explain its intricate nature. And to be successful in this mission it is imperative we all work together.'

De Iuliis' nifty fellow back Scott Stephens, winemaker at Tower Estate, also emphasises the team spirit: 'I've worked in Coonawarra, Napa and Burgundy, and I've never seen camaraderie like this,' he says. Of course, rivalry exists, but it stops at the cellar



Mike De Iuliis

Winemaker/owner, De Iuliis Wines.

Front row

'For me, the Reds has allowed me to work with other winemakers. Pokolbin has a strong wine community, but it doesn't have a community outside of this. The only way to be quality-focused as a small brand is to talk to your neighbours – I can go to Tyrrell's and ask to taste their wines. This is an enormous privilege. Their secret is their vineyards; ultimately, I can't replicate this, but I can take their advice back to my vineyards.'



Rhys Eather

Winemaker/Co-owner of Meerea Park.
Coach and lock

'Last year was our best season ever. With PJ, Jim Chatto, and Chris Tyrrell on board, we reached the grand final. We often play against the Silver Foxes who are all ex-Wallabies (i.e. represented the Australian national team) – a very levelling experience. Len [Evans] left a legacy here, encouraging winemakers to work together to try and challenge the boundaries and misconceptions on Australian wine. Semillon is our window of opportunity and it is the easiest wine to make – what is in the tank is in the bottle.'

door.' Aside from the Pokolbin Reds, there are a number of elite tasting groups offering these winemakers the chance to taste the great wines of the world – all are oversubscribed. To the outsider, these might seem like multiple excuses for the wine trade to enjoy yet another good lunch, but the Hunter Valley has collectively realised that unless you know what the global pinnacles of wine are, it is difficult to push your own boundaries.

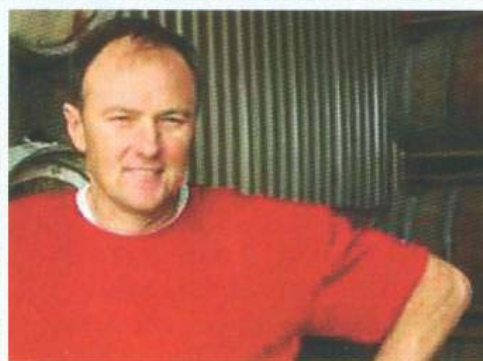
I drank a 1976 Lindemans Semillon during this week of interviews, and it still had fresh, linear acidity balanced against notes of beautifully preserved lemons. It was clear to me that this region has an extraordinary wine heritage. The Pokolbin Reds are hell-bent on living up to these standards and improving on them if they can. If you are going to support one region in Australia, this is surely a good team to get behind... **D**

Amelia Pinsent is the wine critic for
Country Life



Damien Stevens
Winemaker, Margan Wines.
Coach/flanker

'There is an amazing willingness to share knowledge here. We are a small region, and there is always a tendency to develop "cellar palates". Thomo (Andrew Thomas) helps organise group tastings and he works a lot on our technical research. The Australian Wine Research Institute in Adelaide has come up here a few times to help us drive quality forward. I'm really pleased with the quality of the 2007 First XV Shiraz. It's surprisingly good, and I am not just being biased.'



Andrew Margan
Winemaker/owner, Margan Wines.
Lock/flanker

'The First XV Shiraz 2007 exemplifies the team itself. It's big up front, with plenty of width in the mid-section, but is certainly fit for drinking. This is rugby territory, and we have a lot of people here who love their rugby, love their wine, and love this area. The Reds have brought all this together, so that on any given Saturday, the local community gets together to watch their mates get mashed up while drinking lots of beer. Whenever we have an informal tasting of the new vintage, it seems that the word goes out through the rugby network and the next thing you know, we have 30 young winemakers sharing their unbottled wines and the basis for their winemaking techniques. I doubt there are too many wine regions in the world that would work together in this way.'

