

# THE WINES THEY'RE PRODUCING WITH THESE NEW CLONES, ARE AT THE FOREFRONT OF A REVIVAL OF TOP-QUALITY MERLOT IN AUSTRALIA.

by Max Allen

"It's exciting to make something that's different to what's come before – to take Australian merlot in new directions," says Mike Kloak.



Sometimes the best way to understand wine is to taste it when it's grapes, still hanging on the vine. That's why I've come to Wrattontully, north of Coonawarra on South Australia's Limestone Coast. It's just before harvest and I'm bouncing around the 44-hectare vineyard in a big ute. I've been impressed by the first few vintages of merlot from here and I want to find out what makes them so different.

The ute is plus-size to accommodate the lanky frame of Mike Kloak, a tall American former basketball player and IT professional who established their vineyard in 2000 with his Australian wife Colleen Miller, whose background is in banking and finance.

As we drive, Kloak tells me how, when they first planted merlot here, the only vine cuttings they could get were a clone of the variety originally from California, the same clone planted in most Australian vineyards. The grapes were good, and the winery Kloak and Miller sold their fruit to was happy, but they felt they could do better.

So they went looking in vine nurseries for different, recently imported clones. Kloak stops the ute and we pile out. Facing us is a patch of newer plantings: row after row of vines, four different clones of merlot, propagated from cuttings taken from vineyards in France, Italy and Argentina. We walk among the vines and pluck little blue grapes from bunch after bunch. It's a revelation. The old Californian clone grapes taste bland: soft and green. But the newer clone grapes are full of life: juicy acidity bursts in the mouth; dry, dusty tannins hug the tongue.

## Merlot Revival

Kloak and Miller still sell most of their crop to other producers, keeping only a few tonnes for their own label. The wines they're producing with these new clones, are at the forefront of a revival of top-quality merlot in Australia.

Merlot's been on the nose for Australian wine drinkers for a while, partly due to the ubiquity of that rather dull old Californian clone; it's useful in a blend, with cabernet, but on its own it often makes run-of-the-mill wine.

There have been flashes of merlot brilliance in Australia before. In the early 1990s, Dr Bailey Carrodus of the prestigious Victorian vineyard Yarra Yering caused a minor sensation when he released his first straight merlot with the audacious price tag of \$100 – higher than Penfolds Grange at the time. And veteran South Australian winemaker Jim Irvine achieved international acclaim for his sumptuously ripe (and often rather oaky) Grand Merlot about the same time.

Now a new mob of wine producers is giving merlot a go, either by planting new clones, as Kloak and Miller have done, or by making more effort in the vineyard, choosing the best sites and reducing yields.

In Margaret River, Mark Gifford and Tim Markwell of Blue Poles vineyard produce outstanding merlot, both as a single varietal reserve wine, and blended with cabernet franc under the Allouran label. Winemakers Chris Carpenter and Charlie Seppelt coax some remarkable flavours from the old merlot vines at the

Hickinbotham vineyard in McLaren Vale. And some of Australia's cutting-edge natural winemakers have adopted merlot as one of their pet grapes: Gareth Belton of Gentle Folk wines in the Adelaide Hills and Sam Vinciullo in Margaret River produce scintillating, slurpable, quirky blends using merlot as the base and little to no additions such as yeast or preservatives in the winery.

As Mike Kloak says: "It's exciting to be able to make something that's different to what's come before – to take Australian merlot in new directions."

**The 2015 Q (\$30) is a juicy and elegant expression of the grape, with snap and grip.**

**The 2015 Mérite (\$60) is fabulously savoury to taste, with a little fleshier purple fruit stuffing.**

**But this new 2015 Ultra (\$130) is simply outstanding: intense but refined, with deeply perfumed black fruit and seductive oak flavours wrapped in a tight blanket of glossy, graphite-like tannin. It should cellar beautifully.**

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