



SMALL WONDERS

To find the Yarra Valley's smallest winery, you must first find Steels Creek, buried at the dead-end of its own little valley, so trust the signs leading out of Yarra Glen. When the bitumen gives out, you shouldn't, because after several turns down ever-narrowing lanes, vines will materialise. This is the 2ha Steels Creek Estate, and owners Joanne and Simon Peirce know every berry on every stalk.

The big players may have horizon-busting vines, hatted restaurants and helipads. The Peirces represent those in these northern Yarra reaches who do it all themselves and are free to experiment. As fellow small producer Angus Ridley puts it, "Terroir is as much about the winemaker as the vineyard." And these operators have mostly left careers elsewhere, not for an easier life but one more hands-on.

Both Peirces were executives at BHP when Simon was "retired" in 2000, albeit at just 46, with Joanne following a year later, allowing them to concentrate on the vineyard Simon had started 20 years earlier. As this former accountant says, "The 'return on investment' concept took over the 'just growing grapes' lifestyle choice."

"Because we're so small, we like the challenge of doing it all ourselves," Joanne says, although they do grant themselves the luxury of making wine only in exceptional years, 2021 being one, and selling the grapes at other times. Theirs is released only when ready, so expect well-aged wines. They have still and sparkling chardonnay, shiraz and cabernet sauvignon plus, as a point of difference, a straight cabernet franc and the Yarra's only colombar. Simon had ordered riesling vines but there was a mix-up, and he planted the colombar anyway.

The 2016 wine is acidic and beautifully long. Strangely for a Yarra producer, there's no pinot noir; Simon believes the area is too hot. Also, the ground is hard to work and irrigation is a last resort. "The best wines come from the sourest soils," he says.

Sydney barrister Angus Ridley gave up the bar around the time Cathy Phelan left the Australian Ballet barre, and they met at the wine course at Charles Sturt University. Phelan hails from Victoria but there was no argument about where they'd follow their dream. "It's bloody hard making a decent pinot noir in NSW," says Ridley. They bought a block at Dixons Creek, north of Yarra Glen, "with a fruit salad of vines" covering just 5ha. They also do most things themselves, sharing the winemaking duties. "We don't crush, we just hand-plunge," Phelan says. "It makes more delicate wine. We don't fine them a lot, and we don't filter. The less we do the better."

Ridley has broadened his knowledge at Yarra icon Coldstream Hills plus stints in California and Burgundy.

"Burgundy was useful because I saw what

Boutique Yarra Valley wineries are in the big league

JEREMY BOURKE



I liked there. America was about thoughtlessly following a checklist."

The winery is named Sutherland Estate for the family of Phelan's mother, who is less pleased that her daughter's yeasty blanc de noir comes with a crown seal; what is fizz without the preceding pop? But cork taint is too risky, and Ridley distrusts the modern reprocessed cork diam stoppers, because he reckons you can taste the glue. They swapped to screw caps for the table wines in 2006 and haven't lost a bottle.

Apart from its baronial tasting room and deck with a stunning view, Sutherland Estate's points of difference are niche grapes gewurztraminer and tempranillo, the latter made into a dry red, a rose and an old-school Australian red bubble.

"It's just like those classic Seppelt's," Ridley says. "You need to make a decent wine (first). If the base wine isn't any good, you're just making sparkling crap."

Sutherland's neighbour is Steels Gate, named for owners Matthew Davis and Brad Atkins' home block and winery at Steels Creek, which they'd run even when living in the US and Asia. But Davis (engineer) and Atkins (scientist) gave corporate life away in 2017, returning to buy a vineyard with cellar door and restaurant in Dixons Creek.



Charles Medley, top; Cathy Phelan, above, and far left with Angus Ridley; Simon Peirce, inset

Davis tends the vines, Atkins does the cellar door and restaurant, and they share the winemaking. Well, most of it. Their 11-year-old son Sebastian has shown enough interest for the fathers to let him make his own, starting with a merlot to be released this year.

All their wine is vegan, so there are no fining agents, fish oil or egg whites. "These processes remove flavour," says Davis. The wines as a whole are instantly likeable, especially the pinot rose, and even oddities such as Spanish red grape graciano and a table wine from Portuguese port staple bastardo. Another rarity is a semillon. They're just selling out of the previous owner's stock and will make their own semillon next year.

Atkins says it was never their intention to have a restaurant. "But we discovered people wanted more than a charcuterie plate." Now they're employing the talents of head chef Samuel George, who's come to Steels Gate via Levantine Hill and other high-end Yarra venues. I follow Atkins's pairing suggestions of pinot rose with chilli crab and grapefruit, and a refined shiraz for the duck leg confit with dupuy lentils.

Unlike these born-again makers, Charles Smedley of Mandala has been in wine since leaving school, starting out in retail and marketing. In 1998, he and his father established a pinot noir vineyard in Yarra Junction at the other end of the valley. Eight years later he bought a vineyard in Dixons Creek, and each site produces contrasting pinots. The Yarra Junction wine, called the Prophet, is rich and layered, whereas the Dixons Creek version is weightier, spicier and what Smedley says is "more masculine", an interesting observation of a wine labelled the Matriarch. In the whites, he likes to go down the French route with sauvignon blanc as a fume style. "White wines from the Loire region can be so expressive when given love and some oak."

These French-inspired wines can be paired with Italian flavours at Mandala's restaurant DiVino. A dedicated pizza chef turns out the likes of duck prosciutto with foie gras and truffle paste, and wagyu bresaola, while head chef Luca Radaelli concentrates on the main menu. Wonderful arancini are stuffed with porcini and truffle, followed by roasted wagyu cheek with Jerusalem artichoke puree, and King George whiting with broccolini, fennel and apple salad. The flavour of orange influences desserts of tiramisu with a touch of zest and profiteroles with orange blossom filling.

This quartet of modest makers in the northern pocket of the Yarra mirror experiences found all over the valley, where tastings are most likely guided by the person who's done everything from stomping the grapes – "just to smudge the skins", says Joanne Peirce – to designing the labels, all of it a labour of love after decades in different careers.

As Angus Ridley says, "I told my old bar colleagues I was going from the consumption end of wine to the production end. Now I'm doing both."

Jeremy Bourke was a guest of Yarra Valley Smaller Wineries.

IN THE KNOW

The featured producers are part of Yarra Valley Smaller Wineries, which is also a one-stop marketplace for 100 wines, including mixed cases, from 20 makers.

yarravalley-smallerwineries.com.au
steelscreekestate.com.au
sutherlandestate.com.au
steelsgate.com.au
mandalawines.com.au

Dixons Creek and Steels Creek are 60km northeast of Melbourne. To stay over, TS Valley Villa in Steels Creek is a luxury, three-bedroom house with pool and stunning hillside outlook.
tsvalleyvilla.com.au