

The growers behind *Grange*

If you're a South Australian grape grower, there is one club that is considered the career pinnacle.

WORDS GRETEL SNEATH

AFTER 60 CONSECUTIVE VINTAGES, THE iconic positioning of Penfolds Grange in the global wine industry is undisputed. Heritage-listed by the South Australian National Trust, it also heads up the highly influential Langton's Classification of Australian Wine, and is ranked among the most tradeable wines in the world by the London Wine Exchange. *The Wall Street Journal* has even published a Dow Jones Grange Index, reasoning that "wine lovers remember their first Grange the way they remember their first kiss".

Penfolds chief winemaker, Peter Gago, traverses the globe sharing the story of this enigmatic drop, and continues to marvel at its international success. "This isn't just a wine selling in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide; it's Munich, Geneva, Montreal, Mexico, China and Hong Kong," he says. "This is South Australia strutting the word stage, that's what this is about – this is a South Australian story."

It is the story of the sunrise over the Clare Valley, the salty ocean breeze down at Robe, the well-trodden Adelaide foothills, the pristine filtered water trickling through Wrattenbully's limestone bedrock, and the rich and robust terra rossa (red soil) of Coonawarra. It is also the story of the South Australian people – the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale trailblazers, and the generations of growers across the state who have followed in their visionary footsteps. Penfolds Grange captures a sense of place and soul in a bottle, courtesy of the best fruit in the land.

"Nothing is, shall we say, excluded from being a contender – if the quality is there, we don't care where it comes from in South Australia," Peter says. "It's not the old school tie here; if it's the creme de la creme, we will take it."

The pursuit of the finest fruit takes Peter Gago and his team on the ultimate viticultural road trip to the country's most promising vineyards several times each season, during ripening

and harvest. When the grapes are sent to the winery, they are subjected to the same rigorous classification standards as those sourced from company vineyards.

"The bottles come in coded – we don't know the vineyard, the area or the quality – some of it comes off Penfolds vineyards, and some of it comes off growers' vineyards. By doing it blind, based purely on what's in the glass, we take out the emotional and financial bias, and then later on, all is revealed and we find out what is what."

Don Oliver, from Oliver's Taranga at McLaren Vale, describes gaining selection as like winning the grand final. "And if you get a decent quantity, it's like winning the lottery," he says.



Above: Robbie and Rob Mason, who manage Smith's Vineyard in Wrattenbully.
Opposite page: Penfolds chief winemaker Peter Gago.

Photograph: Graham Spring

Photograph: courtesy Penfolds



Left: Marananga grower Paul Georgiadis regularly contributes grapes for use in Grange; pictured is the 2010 vintage. Below: New growers for the 2014 vintage are welcomed to the Penfolds Grange Growers Club; Josephine and Scott Krix of Mongrel Hill Vineyard in Onkaparinga Hills, Rob Mason and Leigh Imbesi from Smith's Vineyard in Wrattenbully, Penfolds chief winemaker Peter Gago, Mardi and Geoff Lewis of Wattle Farm Vineyard in Auburn, and Penfolds senior red winemaker Steve Lienert.



produces very little variation in the berries – the bunch that you pick at the beginning of the row is the same as that in the middle or at the end of the row, and that uniformity of fruit quality is so important when you're trying to grow high-end fruit."

The inclusion of Wrattenbully grapes for the first time will no doubt raise some eyebrows up north, but Peter Gago says SA's Limestone Coast has well and truly earned its spot on the Grange team.

"No region can tick every box every year; if you compare south-eastern SA to places like McLaren Vale or the Barossa, the vineyards are much riskier in a cold year, but also better in a warm year," he explains. "It's giving us more colours to paint with; more blending options." Peter calls the blending process "that synergistic sum of the parts".

"Some people believe that Grange is mainly a Barossa wine, nowadays. That's certainly the core, or the engine room, but all of the lovely 'otherness' exotica – the underpinning, the high notes, the tannins and the florals – delivers something else to the table. We can't put in what God left out; the fruit will only get to a certain level because of that particular growing season, so it's lovely to have that pool of available material."

Those who supply the finest grapes unearthed in South Australia each season gather for an annual Penfolds Grange Growers Club lunch. There are no secret handshakes involved at this elite gathering of a chosen few – rather, it's the chink of stemware in celebration of an inherent knack for harnessing nature's very best qualities. As an added bonus, guests take home a limited edition magnum of Grange symbolising the ultimate career milestone.

"Many of these growers have previously supplied fruit for some of our other key Penfolds labels, which is a very significant achievement in itself, but to make that next step into Grange is like a quantum leap. It's an endorsement for them and the way they are managing their vineyards," Peter says. "Grange is the top of the totem pole; these are wines that people follow not for the first year or decade – people open them 50 years later, so it's got to be the real thing."

In addition to growing premium quality fruit for their own pursuits, Oliver's Taranga vineyards are among the most consistent private suppliers of shiraz for Grange. Don says the secret to the success of his blocks is a willingness to walk a precarious tightrope ultimately controlled by Mother Nature.

"We put the vines under a fair bit of stress to get them to that level – effectively drying them out and leaving them with little fertiliser – and it's very easy to fall off that tightrope, but because we own the vineyard, we are prepared to take that risk," he says. "So far, we've made it into Grange 10 times, so we're doing quite well."

Barossa Valley grower Paul Georgiadis is another regular contributor, supplying shiraz from a block at Marananga that was planted in 1995. He likens the achievement to climbing Mount Everest.

"I worked for Penfolds for 18 years as a grower relations manager before going out on my own, and the first time I got in, I thought they were having a lend of me – I actually felt weak at the knees when I found out it was true," he says. "Only 0.1 per cent of growers actually make it, so to be able to be in that group is good, but to be able to replicate it is even better. It means that you really understand viticulture and terroir."

Paul also works as a consultant for other growers, including Wrattenbully's Rob Mason, whose cabernet made the Grange grade for the first time in 2014. "I manage the vineyard on behalf of Melbourne owners, and while we've had fruit go into Penfolds Bin 707, 389 and St Henri, this is really something special, and it's great for the entire Wrattenbully region," he says. "The cabernet selected for Grange comes from a fantastic site on a big hill which