



The historic railway siding highlights the strong sense of place in Coonawarra.

Beating red heart

COONAWARRA IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S LIMESTONE COAST IS A WINE REGION FILLED WITH HIGH ACHIEVERS...BUT THEY'RE ALSO QUIET ACHIEVERS.

Words **Gretel Sneath**

Spotting in Twitterverse: "Other areas go in or out of fashion, Coonawarra just quietly goes about the business and gets the job done."

Kudos to Coonawarra, the compact strip of wine heaven in south-eastern SA affectionately referred to as Australia's other Red Centre. While the folk may be relaxed in Cabernet land, the same can't be said about the vines producing these award-winning reds. They're stressed to the roots, fighting a weary battle against a potent mix of rich red Terra Rossa topsoil resting on a bed of stubborn calcrete and limestone rock. And it's a good thing.

Katnook Estate vineyard manager, Chris Brodie, says it's that 'limiting factor' which has helped to secure the winery two of Coonawarra's 14 Jimmy Watson trophies for best one- or two-year-old red (1997 Prodigy Shiraz and 1986 Riddoch Cabernet Shiraz) along with a swag of other prestigious awards.

"We've got this beautiful rich clay soil, but if it was unlimited, it would be a nightmare for growing good vines," he explains. "Instead, there's this hard layer of flinty limestone, and the roots just don't penetrate it, so the vines can't grow freely."

It means growth and productivity can be controlled by customising irrigation and canopy management. The result? Small berries with a naturally high skin to juice ratio, mind-blowing colour and flavour intensity, and wonderful tannin structure. Winemaker Wayne Stehbins, who has been with Katnook from the first vintage in 1980, believes you can pick a good Coonawarra Cabernet a mile away – or, at the least, recognise it in a line-up.

"They have their own personality and sense of place, and I think that's an important asset in wine production – you

can see that distinctive regionality in that generosity of dark berry fruit flavours and the really subtle mint characters, and they have that nice suppleness on the palate," he says. "Ultimately, it all boils down to soil and climate, and if wines can display those wonderful colours, flavours and characters, then it gives them a unique place in people's cellars and minds."

TERRIFIC TERROIR

Coonawarra Vignerons Association president, Sue Hodder, agrees that the environment plays a pivotal role in creating reds widely recognised for their cellaring potential.

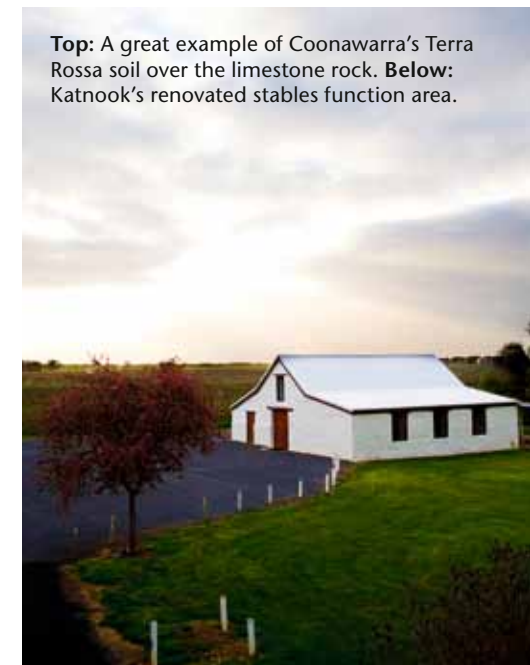
"The unique combination of soil and climate results in a long vine growing and ripening season," she explains. "The cool nights are beneficial for colour development in red grapes, and good acid retention in both red and white grapes."

Sue is the highly decorated chief winemaker at the über successful Wynns Coonawarra Estate. Their cellar door, complete with a MYOB (Make Your Own Blend) laboratory, is housed within the iconic triple-gabled winery developed by Coonawarra founder, John Riddoch.

The Scottish immigrant planted the seed for grape production when he established the Penola Fruit Growing Colony (later renamed the Coonawarra Fruit Colony) in the late 1800s on a section of his sprawling estate. Incredibly, some of the early fruit trees are still believed to be dotted around the landscape, including a stunning row of walnuts at Brand's Laira. It's worth stopping

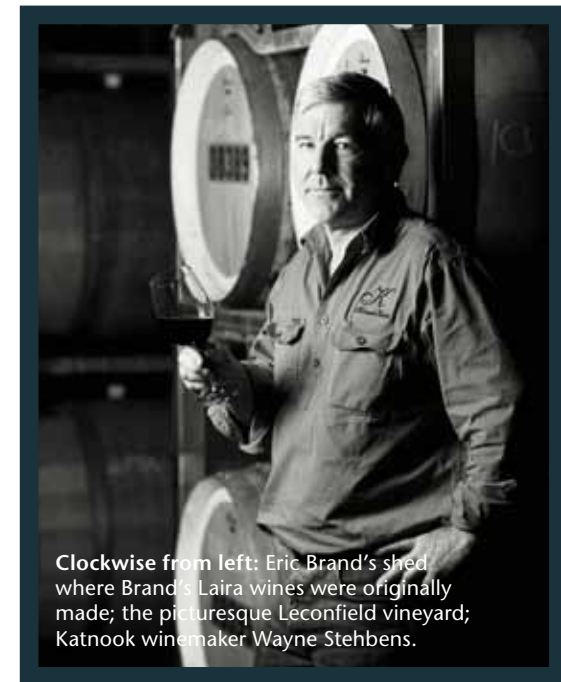


Top: A great example of Coonawarra's Terra Rossa soil over the limestone rock. **Below:** Katnook's renovated stables function area.





Clockwise from left: Luke and Patrick Tocaci in the Patrick of Coonawarra vineyard; the gorgeous entrance to Hollick Wines; the iconic triple-gabled Wynns Coonawarra Estate.



Clockwise from left: Eric Brand's shed, where Brand's Laira wines were originally made; the picturesque Leconfield vineyard; Katnook winemaker Wayne Stehbens.

by at their cellar door as the winery celebrated a bumper 11-trophy haul in 2012, and boasts an exceptional museum cellar—'Eric's Shed'—named after founder, Eric Brand.

Another whopper walnut tree of later vintage is out the front of Redman Winery, which is run by descendants of Riddoch's head cellarman, Bill Redman. No problems there about keeping the family reputation intact; at the recent National Wine Show in Canberra, the 2010 Redman Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon won two trophies—Best Cabernet and Best Red Wine of Show. John Riddoch's relatives are also still in town: great-great grandson, John Rymill, is the managing director of Rymill Coonawarra, and the rich family heritage is on full view at the winery, which features striking architecture, sculptures and paintings in addition to some classy looking (and tasting) wines.

EXTENDED FAMILIES

It's no coincidence that everyone seems interconnected; the Coonawarra wine region measures just 12 kilometres long and two kilometres wide, with a majority of the wineries lining the Riddoch Highway, which makes navigation easy. To put it in perspective, the restaurant Upstairs at Hollick offers great balcony views over vistas of vines. It's operated

by the Hollick family, which will this year celebrate 30 years of winemaking in Coonawarra. Another long-established family winery, Balnaves of Coonawarra, has a 'bell tower' that also offers a stunning panoramic view and acts as a local beacon for visitors. If you're scared of heights, a glass of wine on the deck overlooking the trout-filled pond by the cellar door is about as relaxing and grounded as it gets.

Over the years, terrific new talent has been added to the local gene pool, further enriching Coonawarra's reputation.

Demetrio Zema's great grandfather opened the first wine bar/tavern in Armo, Reggio Calabria, in 1835, and the family passion has travelled down the generations, and indeed across the ocean.

In 1982, Demetrio and his wife Francesca established Zema Estate on a small block of mature vines in the very heart of Coonawarra. Proudly traditional in the 'vine to wine' process, the family hand prunes, bottles and packages on-site. The rows of olive trees sheltering the vines add a taste of Italy, and you simply can't leave the region without some of Mrs Zema's olive oil and preserves, sold at cellar door.

DiGiorgio Family Wines is also injecting some authentic Italian flair into the Terra Rossa strip after taking over the former Rouge Homme winery a decade ago. The Sparkling Pinot Noir is a darling among the Limestone Coast social set, while the 2011 Botrytis Semillon won Best Sweet Style at the 2012 Royal Melbourne Wine Show.

COONAWARRA RIESLING

Another relative newcomer (you've got to be born there to be local, right?), Patrick of Coonawarra, is on a Riesling roll, and seemingly can't go wrong, regardless of vintage. The grapes are planted just down the road at Wrattobully. Winemaker Pat Tocaci gambled when he was the first to plant the variety there, but it worked.

"I cut my teeth making recognisable Rieslings in a cool climate, so while it may be against the grain in an area dominated by red varieties, it is something that I truly believe in," he said, shortly after collecting a Best Riesling trophy for the 2006 Patrick of Coonawarra Aged Riesling at the Royal Adelaide Wine Show. The same wine also wowed the *Selector* Tasting Panel in the Spring 2012 State of Play tasting.

A second generation is now continuing the magic, with Patrick's winemaking son Luke making a stunning debut with the 2012 Riesling, which enchanted judges at the recent Limestone Coast Wine Show.

Leconfield's Coonawarra Riesling is also highly decorated on the show circuit, while the Leconfield Merlot recently won trophies in Brisbane and Sydney. "Coonawarra is not only about Cabernet Sauvignon!", says senior winemaker, Paul Gordon, smiling, though he makes a mighty fine job of that as well. The Hamilton family started Leconfield in McLaren Vale, but in the 1970s Sydney Hamilton ventured to Coonawarra to fulfil his ambition of growing and making classic Australian Cabernet Sauvignon, a tradition that carries through to this day.

GETTING THERE

Coonawarra is located roughly midway between Melbourne (440km) and Adelaide (375km) on SA's Limestone Coast, which means it's rarely doable as a day trip. (Although tell that to the FIFO folk who land on the local air strip and stroll into town to replenish cellar stocks.) For the rest of us travelling peasant airways, (a.k.a the car) the long drive is worth it.

WHERE TO STAY

Punters Retreat on the corner of Riddoch Highway and Racecourse Road is where you can get right amongst it staying in the heart of the Punters Corner vineyard (birthplace of the 2000 Jimmy Watson winner). This adults-only getaway oozes sophistication, with thoughtful architecture echoing the panoramic views. Four double bedrooms make it the ideal group 'grape escape'.

If there are more takers for the ultimate wine weekend away, Chardonnay Lodge Resort has 39 large suites.

The Coonawarra township offers a small selection of B&B accommodation, including Koonara Cottage, owned by the Reschke Family of Koonara Wines fame. An original cottage from their farming property was literally sawn in three and brought over to the heart of Coonawarra by a team of horses in 1942.

Historic Penola is just minutes away, and also has a host of up-market accommodation options along with great restaurants and boutique stores and more cellar doors. Koonara Wines' headquarters is here, and you'll discover a great selection of 'other worldly' wines with names like Angel's Peak, Ambriel's Gift, Ezra and The Guardian Angel. The company has built on the food/wine theme by selling its own Larder homewares range in addition to wine. You will be comfortable exploring the country village on foot.

WHERE TO EAT

Upstairs at Hollick is the perfect place to soak up the views overlooking the vineyards while you enjoy regional cuisine and an extensive wine list covering all of the producers in the region. Hollick wines are available by the glass, so you can literally pop downstairs to taste your next wine for the ultimate food pairing. Try the local lamb backstrap with giant couscous, spiced pumpkin and Shiraz & rosemary jus, matched with the Hollick 2010 'Tannery Block' Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot.

A winemaker and his wife run the funky Fodder café in the original Coonawarra school house on Memorial Drive. The menu is made from scratch

using seasonal produce. The fabulous wine list is divided into three sections—Home, Away, and Far Away.

For European fine dining with farm-fresh produce and ocean catch, book into Pipers of Penola located in the heart of Penola in a former Methodist church. Chef Simon Bowen has an impressive pedigree, being the son and brother of Bowen Estate's winemakers, and he's added his own finesse to the Pipers kitchen, collecting a string of restaurant awards in the process.

If you would prefer to cook up your own storm, head down Petticoat Lane to the National Trust Herb Garden located in the back yard of one Penola's oldest homes, Sharam Cottages. Here, you can pick your own herbs using the scissors and bags provided, with payment via an honesty system. (Sssh—this is quite possibly Penola's best-kept secret).