



HOW THIS WINERY IS MAKING ITS LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP WORK

By Max Allen

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‘You can pull your hair out or accept that everyone’s had to adapt’, says the UK-based co-founder of Thistledown, renowned for its grenache wines.



Giles Cooke checking fruit at harvest pre-COVID. He says when they started their winery, Australian grenache was in a bad place.

When Giles Cooke stepped onto a plane in Adelaide in March to head back home to the UK, he thought it might be a while before he could come back to Australia.

‘And sadly,’ says the Edinburgh-based Master of Wine, ‘that’s how it’s panned out.’

Cooke is the co-founder – with fellow UK-based Master of Wine Fergal Tynan – of the South Australian wine label Thistledown. Although they’re based on the other



side of the world, Cooke and Tynan spend months in Australia each year, visiting growers, harvesting, crushing grapes, working closely with winemaking consultant Peter Leske at his winery in the Adelaide Hills. And another few months travelling the world selling the wine.



Inspecting grenache bunches. Cooke now relies on others to send him tastings to the UK.

Or they did, before the pandemic hit.

‘Normally I’d be there right now,’ says Cooke when I speak to him over Zoom. ‘I’d be ensconced at the winery, tasting everything in the barrel room, all the wines from the new vintage. But I can’t so I’ve had to have Pete send me samples over here. It’s an elaborate process and it’s not the same as when you’re there. But look, you can pull your hair out about it or accept that everyone’s had to adapt.’

Cooke and Tynan established Thistledown in 2010 and by the end of the decade had built a strong following, culminating with a shower of trophies and gold medals at last year’s McLaren Vale Wine Show for their stunning grenaches.

This is particularly rewarding for Cooke.

‘What’s the point of travelling to the other side of the world and just doing the same as everybody else?’

— Giles Cooke, Thistledown

THISTLEDOWN WINE COMPANY

‘When we started Thistledown, Australian Grenache was in a bad place,’ he says.

‘Not many people were treating the grape with the respect it deserved. You could still walk into these amazing old grenache vineyards in McLaren Vale and the grower was overjoyed to sell it to you because so few winemakers were interested in it.’

Cooke knew from his travels through Spain (‘My first love,’ he says, ‘I make wine in Rioja, too’), that grenache had the potential to make great wine if handled properly – picked earlier than the Australian high-alcohol norm, not overworked in the winery, aged in older oak.

‘I wasn’t really seeing the subtlety and delicacy that grenache can produce in the wines I was tasting in Australia,’ he says. ‘But I was seeing the beauty in the stories of the vineyards. People like third-generation grower Bernard Smart: barely able to sell a grenache grape for 30 or 40 years to wineries, so he’d get family and friends from Adelaide and Melbourne to come and pick. Both Fergal and I are history graduates, so we’re complete suckers for that kind of story.’



Third-generation grower Bernard Smart.



It was decades before winemakers started buying his grenache grapes.

Cooke acknowledges that he wasn't the only one reconsidering grenache at the time. McLaren Vale locals like viticulturist and winemaker Toby and Emmanuelle Bekkers, Pete Fraser at Yangarra and Rob Mack at Aphelion – among others – have all contributed to re-energising the grape's reputation over the past decade by producing thrilling, vibrant 'new-wave' expressions of a variety that, as Cooke puts it, 'narrate the stories of the vineyards faithfully and with great clarity'.

But he also argues that being from the UK initially helped him and Tynan see what many locals couldn't.

'A lot of wine regions benefit from an outsider's perspective,' he says. 'People who come in without accepted, received wisdom. There are other places in the world where you can see this happen. It took outsiders like (Danish winemaker) Peter Sisseck in Ribera del Duero (in Spain) to show the people there what value they have in their own production.'

'Also, we wanted to make a difference: What's the point of travelling to the other side of the world and just doing the same as everybody else?'

This – beyond the frustration of not being able to sit on a plane for 24 hours so he can taste his new wines straight from barrel – is also a concerning aspect of the pandemic for Cooke.

'You'd have to be mad to not be worrying about the long-term consequences of all this,' he says. 'Everyone is accepting of the reality we're in at the moment – I'm doing a huge number of Zoom tastings – but it can't be the way forward for wine forever. If we regress into our smaller worlds we're going to be less rich, culturally as well as financially, than we were before.'

SPOILED FOR CHOICE

For a relatively small business, Thistledown produces an awful lot of different wines. At least 30 are currently available on the company's website across multiple vintages – from the widely available, \$20-ish everyday drinking Gorgeous Grenache range (a red, a rosé, and from this vintage a white, made from the



grenache blanc grape) to bottlings of more unusual or small-batch wines under the Advance Release label (the 2018 Advance Release Roussanne, \$60, available through wine.qantas.com, is a fabulously rich and textural dry white) and experimental wines sold in crown-sealed beer bottles under the \$19 Tabula Rasa label.

It's an impressive portfolio, but the standout wines for me are the single-vineyard reds – particularly these three grenaches sourced from different sites in McLaren Vale (the vivid, spicy 2019 Advance Release Mattschoss Vineyard Grenache, \$65, from a cool site in the Eden Valley, is also outstanding).



2019 Thistledown She's Electric Grenache [McLaren Vale]

'Grapes from a vineyard in the Seaview area of the vale, a site boasting both old bush vines and younger plantings of grenache. Super-fresh, rose-petally and gorgeously sweet-fruited, with a tangy Campari-like edginess (50 per cent whole bunches in the ferment) keeping it lively and bright. \$65'

2018 Thistledown Sands of Time Grenache [McLaren Vale]

'Grapes from a 75-year-old grenache vineyard in the sandy soils of the Blewitt Springs area. There's a lovely, almost gamey, undergrowth twang to this wine, a deliciously savoury quality, with fine but sturdy Italianate tannins. Like all the grenaches here, it will cellar well for a few years. \$80'

2018 and 2019 Thistledown This Charming Man Grenache [McLaren Vale]

'Grapes from an old vineyard – some vines dating back over a century – high up in the Clarendon area, farmed for three generations by the Smart family. The 2018 is bolder and spicier, with more saturated black fruit and humus-like earthiness; the 2019 is more lifted, more translucent, with silkier red fruit, but still with a dark, sinewy undertow. Both are excellent. \$80'.