

THE WINEMAKER FILES //

Giles Cooke MW, Thistledown Wines

When we first started exploring, Grenache was the variety that we were offered by a lot of the vineyards – nobody wanted it. When you tasted the wines that were made back then, they were either Shiraz lookalikes or they were blended away – you could see why nobody was buying Grenache at that point.

We believed that making Grenache would fulfil our original idea for Thistledown: creating subtler, textural, food-friendly wines. There was the opportunity to have access to these historic vineyards and to completely change the style of wines being made from them.

The Thistledown project is spread right across South Australia. I do a lot of work up in the Riverland with old vines and that's roughly a three-hour drive from Adelaide. But if you're looking at Blewitt Springs, which is really the grand cru for Grenache in Australia, you've got four or five vineyard sources there that are just minutes away from each other, some just over the brow of a hill.

I love working in McLaren Vale. Most of our best Grenache is in McLaren Vale and I still think there is a lot of undiscovered land that could be planted in the region. It's a beautiful region – one minute you can be swimming in the sea and 10 minutes later you can be picking grapes up in Blewitt Springs. I love it for the diversity of styles and cultures and people, and the openness to outsiders.

Adelaide Hills is hugely exciting, I think. Marginal in places for some varieties – and who's to say we won't be doing Grenache there before too long?

Everybody thinks Australia is this amazingly easy country to grow fruit in, but it's pretty rugged and difficult at times. Certainly this last year has proved that in horrific ways.

Demand for Grenache has gone through the roof – everybody wants it and the price has gone up. There is still a lot we are doing to refine the way the growers grow the fruit. But I think it's fair to say that because they are old vines, there is relatively low-intervention viticulture.

Most people these days agree that you rarely regret picking too early and you always regret picking too late. "Picking on the way up" is why I spend so much time in the vineyard pre-harvest; we don't want to be tasting a load of grapes that are like jam. We want grapes with energy and brightness. The pH levels are better and alcohols are a bit lower, and it expresses the site more faithfully than if you just get universally very ripe fruit.

There's been a radical shift in the way wines have been sold, away from the on-trade into indies and national retail, and our sales have held up an awful lot better than you might expect. It suggests that independent retail is more pro-Australia than the on-trade has ever been.



Giles started Thistledown in 2010 in partnership with fellow MW Fergal Tynan. With a winery in the Adelaide Hills, they source grapes from across South Australia, and have a particular penchant for Grenache, which they like to make in a distinctly un-Australian style.

Thistledown is imported into the UK by Alliance Wine
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I think the enthusiasm for the textural, aromatic and lighter styles of Australian wines is beginning to get a lot of traction.

We are looking more at sustainable farming. It's important to us, coming in as outsiders, that we are not adding to the problems that a particular country has got. As a business we will be putting a lot more focus on that, because we want to – and, realistically, because we have to. It's not getting any cooler in Australia in the near future.

The Great Escape Chardonnay

RRP: £15.99

Almost like the baby Suiven – our top Chardonnay. It's the same fruit, just treated slightly differently. It's all about picking relatively early. We're looking for pretty high acidity. It's all wild-fermented. A portion is fermented in concrete eggs and a portion in barrel. It's lean and crisp with loads of citrus. It's fresh, bright and hugely versatile.



Gorgeous Grenache

RRP: £12.99

Riverland is a region which has been growing grapes since WWI. We mapped out some of the old plots and paid them a lot more for their fruit and proved that you can make something that's delicious, juicy, varietal and sustainable. The vibrancy and freshness is the thread that runs from this wine to all our top wines.



Vagabond Grenache

RRP: £24.99

I'd call this our benchmark. It's dry-grown bush vines on pure sand, which is our preferred soil profile for Grenache. It's all relatively early picked, and wild-fermented, with differing degrees of whole bunch in there. It's beautifully aromatic and polished. It's very consistent and defines what Thistledown is all about.

