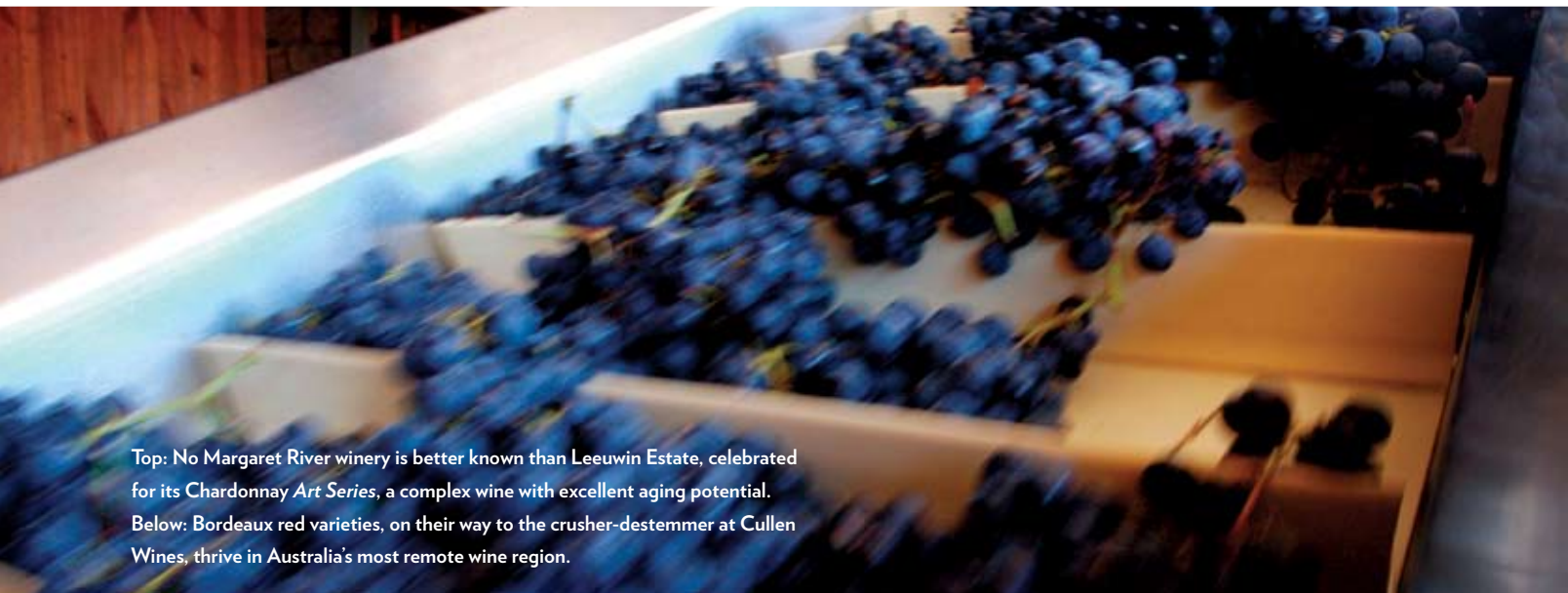


Distant Beauty:

Australia's Margaret River

By Laurie Daniel



Top: No Margaret River winery is better known than Leeuwin Estate, celebrated for its Chardonnay *Art Series*, a complex wine with excellent aging potential.
Below: Bordeaux red varieties, on their way to the crusher-destemmer at Cullen Wines, thrive in Australia's most remote wine region.



Australia first attracted American wine lovers

with its easy-to-drink, easy-on-the-wallet, mass-produced brands such as Lindemans and Rosemount (and more recently, Yellowtail), and Shiraz became better known than Syrah. Even US wine consumers familiar with estate-produced Aussie wines often think that Australia is all about jammy, opulent Shiraz, especially the bottles from the Barossa Valley.

But Australian wine country doesn't begin and end in Barossa or even in the surrounding state of South Australia. Selected pockets of the vast state of Western Australia are home to some fine vineyards and wineries. The state's best-known appellation—or "Geographical Indication," as the Aussies refer to these growing areas—is Margaret River, roughly a three-hour drive south of Perth.

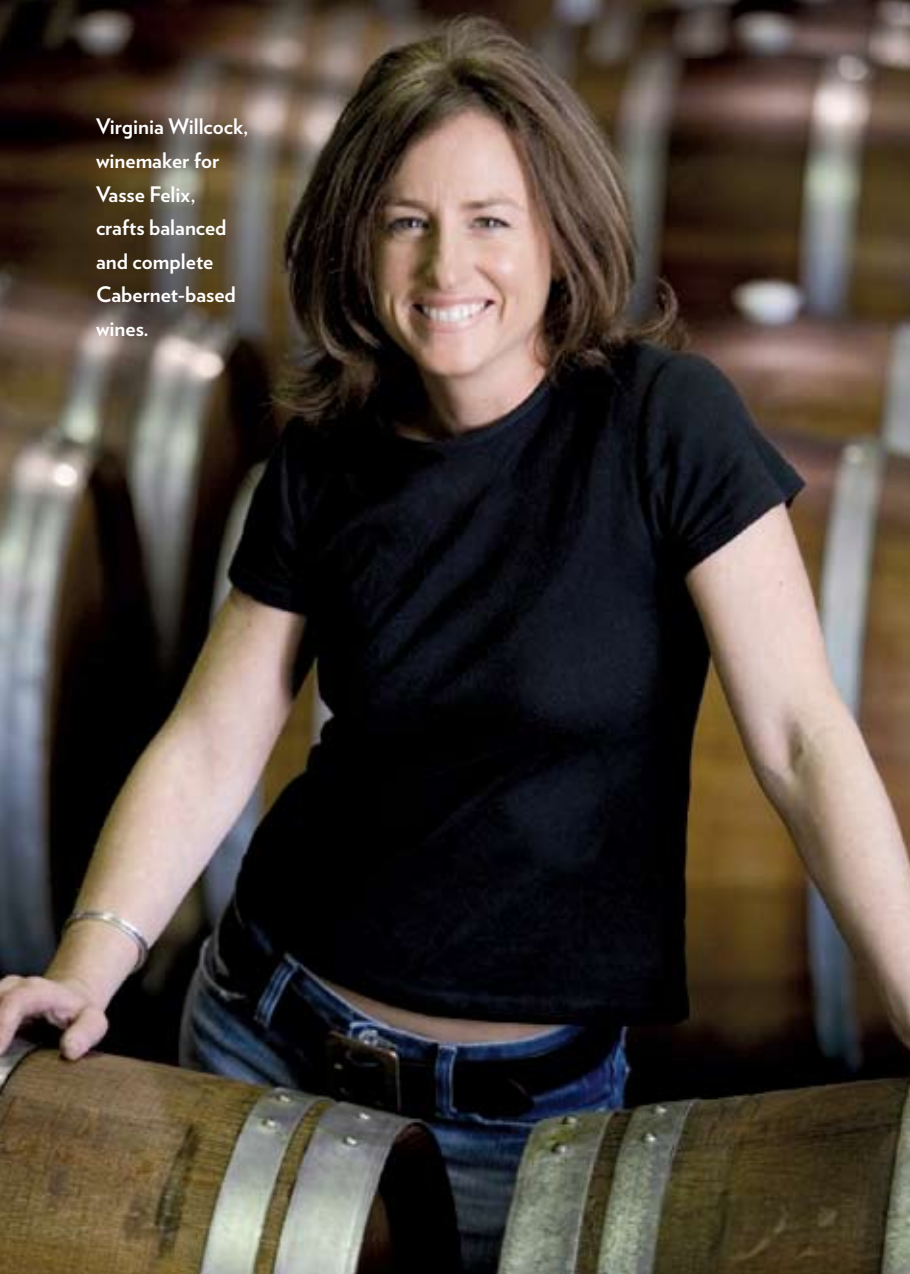
Climate, Soils, Grapes, Subregions

While wine has been made in the Barossa for 150 years, the vintners of Margaret River got a much later start. There was a smattering of viticulture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the modern era began after agronomist John Gladstones published a paper in 1965 that identified Margaret River

as a suitable viticultural area. According to Gladstones, the region had a climate similar to that of Bordeaux but with reliable summer sun and a low risk of spring frost and autumn rain. A handful of Australian doctors—Tom Cullity, who founded Vasse Felix; Bill Pannell of Moss Wood; and Kevin Cullen of Cullen Wines—got wind of the report and planted vineyards.

Margaret River is a dramatically beautiful region, roughly 60 miles long and 20 miles wide, with ocean on three sides, so there's a strong maritime influence, especially from the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. (With all this coastline, it's no surprise that many of the winemakers start their days with a little surfing.) The difference between summer and winter temperatures is the smallest of any Australian wine region. Summers are dry and warm, though the heat is tempered by breezes off the ocean. (Spring gales, on the other hand, can disrupt fruit set and can carry salt miles inland, which can damage the vines.) The best sites have some protection from the winds. The region's majestic karri and jarrah forests help provide windbreaks. The dominant soil type is sand or gravel over weathered granite. Irrigation is common because of the dry summers and the free-draining soils, although a few vineyards—for instance, Leeuwin Estate and Cullen—are dry-farmed.

Virginia Willcock,
winemaker for
Vasse Felix,
crafts balanced
and complete
Cabernet-based
wines.



Margaret River does not currently have any official subregions, but Gladstones made the argument in 1999 that there should be six subregions based on soil and climate. Temperatures are warmest in the north, around Wilyabrup, where the early wineries were established. Some high-profile estates, such as Leeuwin Estate, are southwest of the town of Margaret River, and still other vineyards have been planted around Karridale in the southernmost part of the region. This southern area is cooler because of the influence of the Southern Ocean, which stretches to Antarctica. Farther inland, in the flat northeast, there are large plantings near Jindong.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Wines based on Cabernet Sauvignon were the first from Margaret River to gain attention, and the variety remains the region's standard bearer and leading cultivar. It's nearly always warm enough to ripen Cabernet, but the climate

isn't so hot that the grape loses its varietal character (as can be the case in Barossa). Cabernet is often blended with the other red Bordeaux varieties, especially Merlot and Cabernet Franc; sometimes a little Shiraz is added.

Virginia Willcock, winemaker at Vasse Felix, declares Margaret River Cabernet to be "some of the best in the world" and comments, "We pride ourselves on the fact that our Cabernet actually looks distinctively Cabernet, with such lifted aromatics and a dry but juicy appeal. We don't ever underestimate the difficulty in producing great Cabernet, in the vineyard and the winery. The aromas and flavors and structure can be awesome, but never without serious care and attention to detail."

Devil's Lair winemaker Oliver Crawford adds, "Margaret River Cabernet has very strong fruit characters that lean more toward the savory end of the spectrum. Cigar box and leafy characters are usually evident, with cassis and black fruits supporting."

Willcock, who makes the superb Cabernet-dominated blend called *Heytesbury*, thinks the best Cabernet sites are on the leaner, well-drained, gravelly loam soils, which limit vine vigor. Wines from the northern part of the appellation, she says, tend to be bigger and richer, with a fruit character resembling black currant jam; as you go south, the herbal notes get stronger, and some Cabernets can have pronounced eucalyptus flavors.

Even the bigger-style wines retain some elegance. Indeed, Juniper Estate winemaker Mark Messenger says that "power with elegance" is what defines Margaret River Cabernet. "It is the underlying power and structure wrapped up in that velvety mouth-feel—the old 'iron fist in a velvet glove'—that sets them apart from other Australian Cabernets," he concludes.

In addition to the Vasse Felix *Heytesbury*, the Juniper Estate, and the Devil's Lair, top Cabernets include the Leeuwin Estate *Art Series* and Howard Park's *Leston*. Cullen Wines' outstanding Cabernet-dominant blend called *Diana Madeline* (named for Diana Cullen, who established the winery with her husband in 1966) contains all five red Bordeaux varieties. Winemaker Vanya Cullen believes that blending makes a more complete, interesting wine.

Iconic Chardonnay

It might seem counterintuitive that a region known for Cabernet Sauvignon would also grow excellent Chardonnay, but that's the case in Margaret River. Indeed, one of Australia's top Chardonnays, Leeuwin Estate's *Art Series*, is from the heart of the appellation.

Leeuwin's founder, Denis Horgan, was encouraged to plant Chardonnay by Robert Mondavi, who acted as a consultant when Horgan started to develop his vineyard in the 1970s. "Those first plantings excelled and resulted in further plantings," Horgan points out. The grape is planted on north-facing slopes with well-drained soils.

The Leeuwin *Art Series* Chardonnay is rich and creamy without being flabby because of its core of firm acidity. That taut acidity is what good Margaret River Chardonnays have in common, especially in recent vintages, whether the wines are made in a richer style or in a leaner, racier mode. The Vasse Felix *Heytesbury*, Devil's Lair, and Cape Mentelle Chardonnays are among the other rich examples, while Beach Head and Wildberry Estate are good examples of the leaner style.

Australian Standby

Margaret River vintners don't have as much experience with Shiraz as they do with Cabernet and Chardonnay, but the grape is already showing a lot of promise. Juniper Estate's Messenger once described Margaret River Shiraz as "a funny beast," meaning that it doesn't fit the mold of the warm, opulent, high-alcohol style found in, say, Barossa and McLaren Vale. Instead, Margaret River Shiraz is often more savory than jammy.

"Shiraz is still very much in the discovery stage," Willcock says. Shiraz from the cooler southern part of the appellation, she adds, "tends to be more intense, with pepper characters coming in with lovely raspberry fruit background. Toward the north, more ripe plum and juniper berries seem to be the dominant characters." Leeuwin Estate's Horgan is a fan of the more southern sites for Shiraz. The original plantings at Leeuwin were grafted over to Sauvignon Blanc, he says, and Shiraz was subsequently planted about ten miles to the south, where, Horgan notes, "[it] has served us extremely well."

Cape Mentelle, Wildberry Estate, and Howard Park produce Shirazes that are dark, dense, and rich, while the examples from Leeuwin Estate (under its *Art Series* label), Vasse Felix, and Juniper Estate tend to be more elegant.

Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc

Although a few wineries make straight Semillons (in Australia, the "e" in Semillon is not accented) or Sauvignon Blancs, the two varieties are most commonly combined into a blend often referred to as "SBS" or "Sem-Sav." Vanya Cullen thinks the combination is more interesting, but some of the blending may be more market driven. Messenger, for one, says he's a "big fan of Margaret River Semillon, plus I make one for Juniper Estate, but it is a very unfashionable varietal on its own. Put Sauvignon Blanc on the label, however, and away it sells. Sauvignon Blanc is a bit of an inconsistent performer from vintage to vintage in these parts, so blending it with Semillon makes a more consistent and fuller style of wine."



What Is a Margaret River Wine?

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon ranges from big and rich to leaner and a little herbal, but elegance is a hallmark. Chardonnay can taste of pineapple, stone fruit, pear, and lemon-lime, depending on where it's grown, but all the wines have a taut core of acidity. Shiraz tends to be savory rather than jammy, with dark berry fruit and notes of white pepper, cedar, and sometimes eucalyptus. Semillon/Sauvignon Blanc blends are usually made in a vivid, somewhat grassy, unwooded style, though some wineries, such as Cullen, age a portion of the wine in oak.

AGING

Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet-based blends are good candidates for aging; the best can age gracefully for 10 to 15 years. Margaret River wineries have a shorter track record with Shiraz, but a good aging target appears to be 5 to 10 years. Chardonnays have the acidity to age but with a few exceptions (notably Leeuwin Estate *Art Series*) should be consumed within a couple of years of release; their freshness is part of their charm. Semillon/Sauvignon Blanc blends are generally best when young.

RECENT VINTAGES

2007—Excellent. High quality across the board. Best vintage in recent years?

2006—Cool vintage. Very good Chardonnay. Shiraz better than Cab.

2005—Fall rains led to mixed vintage. Those who picked before the rains fared better.

2004—Very good. Large harvest with ripe reds and whites.

Margaret River on the List

It's a shame that so few American wine drinkers know anything about Margaret River wines, and those who do probably couldn't name more than three producers beyond Leeuwin Estate, whose famous Chardonnay *Art Series* often appears as the sole Margaret River representative on restaurant lists.

Wine people who have visited Margaret River or have only tasted the wines from the region hold them in high esteem. Laurie Daniel, the author and reviewer of this article, who has done both, notes, "The quality is generally high. Though they're not cheap, the Cabs offer good value when you compare them to, say, Napa Valley." Daniel continues, "I think that steak houses or other restaurants that serve a lot of red meat should be giving the Margaret River Cabs a close look, though they probably would be a hand-sell because they don't have the reputation of Napa or Bordeaux."

Drew Hendricks, beverage-education director at Houston-based Pappas Restaurants, Inc., a hospitality group that includes flagship Pappas Bros. steak houses in Houston and Dallas, offers, "Wines from . . . the Margaret River area are great wines. They represent a cooler-climate style of Australian wines that exhibit a bit of restraint, great structure, and a defined sense of place. I think these wines are more akin to Bordeaux than to the wines of the Barossa Valley or McLaren Vale. There are wines in all price points from this area, all delivering great value."

Pointing out that Margaret River wines haven't received the fanfare and high scores bestowed on the icon wines of South Australia, Hendricks remarks, "These wines can require special attention from the staff." But that hasn't discouraged his restaurant group from stocking seven wines at its restaurants, from a Flinders Bay Merlot/Malbec *Mayflower* at \$36 to Gralyn Estate Cabernet Sauvignon at \$195.



A favorite Margaret River pairing for Drew Hendricks, MS, is the Vasse Felix Semillon-Sauvignon Blanc (\$60) with bacon-wrapped scallops.

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—Oliver Crawford,
Devil's Lair winemaker

Semillon often dominates the blend, although Sauvignon Blanc takes the leading role in the versions from Cullen, Cape Mentelle, and Leeuwin Estate (called *Siblings*). The blends are most often unwooded, although a portion of Cullen's *Ephraim Clarke* blend spends three months in French oak barrels, two-thirds of them new.

There's a smattering of other grape varieties, too. Leeuwin Estate, for example, produces an excellent dry Riesling. Verdelho and Chenin Blanc make an occasional appearance, and Cape Mentelle even produces Zinfandel, although it's not exported to the United States.

All these grapes add some welcome variety to the Margaret River wine scene, and Crawford of Devil's Lair thinks that Tempranillo, Fiano, and Albariño have potential for the area. But neither they nor the more common Chardonnay or Shiraz are likely to eclipse Cabernet Sauvignon. Margaret River Cab is simply too good. "While we should always look for new varieties, we should not forget our grass roots," Crawford concludes.

:: reviewer's choice ::

Turn to our *Food, Wine, and Spirits Review* for Laurie Daniel's reviews of Margaret River Wines, including her favorites.

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