



A picture-postcard view of the Seppeltsfield estate in South Australia

TASTINGS OF HISTORY

A tradition begun at one of Australia's great wineries offers a remarkably humbling experience

NICK RYAN

You can't help but admire the mind that can see a future the temporal vessel containing it never will. Antoni Gaudi began construction on his ambitious cathedral in Barcelona in 1882 knowing full well he'd never see its completion. It stands there, a monumental work still in progress, as the world's most striking symbol of dreams that stretch beyond human capacity to see them fulfilled.

Four years before Gaudi broke Barcelona ground, an ambitious young man was busy turning the business his father established into one of the great estates in wine's New World.

To celebrate the opening of a grand new Port cellar at the family's Seppeltsfield estate, Benno Seppelt set aside a puncheon (500 litres) of that vintage's finest tawny port, with the instructions it be left untouched until it was released to celebrate the building's centenary.

The process has been repeated every year since that first barrel was set aside in 1878, creating what is believed to be the longest unbroken run of currently accessible vintages of any wine in the world. To mark the release of the 1922 vintage last week, The Australian took a deep dive into Seppeltsfield's grand Centennial Cellar, taking snapshots in time through some of the most compelling wines to be found anywhere on the planet. You don't taste these wines like you do any other. They defy conventional criteria and establish their own benchmarks. Even those wine writers who think wines can be captured in numbers recognise the limitations of the practice in the face of this wine and hand out perfect scores as standard practice.

They are concentrated by the passage of time to a point that it almost seems like the liquid can't contain the complexity within. And they outlast all of us.

2022
This is probably the most pointless tasting note I'll ever write. My grandchildren will have snuggled into the family burial plot by the time this wine is released to the market. It's effusive and primary, endowed with everything it needs for the long journey ahead. Most importantly it's balanced beautifully and expansive enough to weather the contraction of 100 winters to come.

I hope there's someone still around to enjoy it.

2011
With 91 years ahead of it before release, this wine is just starting to plump the pillows, tuck the sheets and settle into slumber. The heady primary fruit has dialled back a fraction and 11 years in gently oxidative oak has allowed the first nutty signs of rancio to emerge. This prompts an interesting discussion with chief winemaker Fiona Donald about the



Clockwise from top, Seppeltsfield port barrels; Benno Seppelt; Seppeltsfield's 1922 Para Vintage Tawny

notion of "architectural" terroir. The idea that external elements such as weather, vineyard aspect and soil type influence a wine's character is well known, but are wines like this, that spend decades resting within the same four walls, shaped by the buildings that house them?

When a wine sits in the one place as long as these do, it has to have some influence and Donald wonders if the distinctive almondy note, in the way these wines express the nuttiness we describe as rancio, is influenced by the physical space in which they rest.

2001 and 1901
The two wines that bookend the first century of Australia's Federation. At 21, the younger wine smells like toasted fruit loaf, packed with dried raisins, citrus peel and nuts. There's a fine aldehyde edge and an energetic acid line. Then telescope backwards through a hundred years and you see how the passage of time concentrates, intensifies and deepens the wine. The 1901 is all dark toffee, scorched nuts, camphor and coal dust. Even its tasting notes come from a bygone age. It's with these two wines side by side that the changes to the physi-

cal nature of liquid are most evident. Swirl the 2001 and the burnished liquid coats the glass before slowly falling back down. Swirl the 1901 and, after the extra effort required to get it moving, it hangs to the side of the glass and it just stays there, as if the glass has been to the window tinters.

1990
This was a justly celebrated vintage in the Barossa, so I was intrigued to see if the seasonal blessings bestowed on the dry red wines of that year - most still holding nicely, some sliding away - would be evident in a wine with the added distractions of fortification and three decades of barrel maturation.

The best Barossa reds of 1990 were notable for their balance and poise and those traits are evident here, too. Thirty-two years in oak has pulled the corset tight on this wine without an ounce of flab popping out. It's heady with aromas of dark toffee and woody spices, with a subtle savoury note reminiscent of almost burnt bits of Chinese roast pork. It's a wine with noticeably more layering than any of the younger wines in the tasting that is obviously brought about by the extra ageing but quite possibly also because

of the quality of the wine at the very start of the far-from-finished journey it's currently on.

1984
Orwell's gloomy vision didn't really come to fruition and even if it had I may not have noticed, lost as I was in the tiny tunes from my Sony Walkman heading to my first year of high school. It was also the year that I lifted a more modest bottle of Para Liqueur port from the old man's cellar on the way to a party that ended with deep humiliation and a pair of desert boots beyond salvation.

A fabulous wine from a formative year that has passed through the 38 years since in better shape than I have.

It's a lighter, less impactful wine than others in the tasting. You could almost say it's relatively simple, in the same way that if you conducted a dozen neurosurgeries in a plummeting plane using play-dough instruments, one might go more smoothly than the others. There are whiffs of funeral incense and quince paste, some wintergreen and even a mysterious note of lime pickle. A strong argument that vintage variation still pokes through these wines.

1971
The longer you work in wine the

more infrequently you have to confront wines from your birth year that deliver existential dread with every drop. Being both beautiful and profound at 51 is a feat achieved by the wine being tasted but not the bloke tasting it.

Fiona Donald draws a line with these wines at 50. Before that they are aged tawnies that share common characteristics with similar wines from other places, but once they punch through the half-century they leave the world of ordinary wines and start their metamorphic journey to centenarian curiosity.

The distinctive olive green character these wines get with significant age is starting to emerge and it sticks to the glass like engine oil. Its toffee notes get darker, its layers compress and get tighter. Just a drop or two delivers an explosion of flavour, rippling waves of panforte and espresso, dry gum leaves, dark chocolate, fennel pollen and preserved ginger.

One of us is a magnificent 100-year-old in the making. The other is a bit of a long shot.

1967
In the Summer of Love, as hippies tuned in and dropped out on the other side of the world, cellarmen of more conservative bearing were racking this wine to the barrel in which it still rests, with another 45 years to go before release.

Ronald Ryan went to the gallops and Sgt Pepper played for lonely hearts.

It's starting to get really unctuous now, like a massage with molasses, redolent with the scents of dark liqueur chocolates, toasted almonds and gingerbread.

Anyone who will get to taste it will be grateful they're not dead.

1953
Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay stood atop Everest and Queen Elizabeth II ensured the crown would fit as this wine bubbled through its fermentation, slurped up its fortifying spirit and assumed its position in the sequential line of barrels in the old Centennial cellar.

Those confident they'll see its release 31 years from now have little need for these notes now, but at 69 the wine is more open-knit than some others, not as dense and tightly packed, but still showing complexity through scents of incense and burning sage, dried orange rinds and pecan pie.

1939 and 1945
A wine from a world on the brink of war and another born as a changed world emerged. The 1945 potentially shows the signs of minds and hands occupied elsewhere. It's quite rich and luscious on the front palate but dries out faster than comparable vintages with a quinine-like edge. Or

maybe it's just an awkward stage - 77 can be a difficult age.

The 1939, on the other hand, is mind-blowing. It erupts from the glass, a heady swirl of clove and coriander seed, spiced oranges, Dutch liquorice and gingerbread. It has a distinctive granular tannin line that threads a bit of grit through all that luscious sweetness, and its freshness and energy at this age is jaw-dropping.

That I might be a chance to see this wine at 100 is almost reason enough to make some lifestyle changes.

1922
Current release, \$1500 (100ml)
A heady swirl, a maelstrom of complex and intriguing aromas and flavours. Walnut liqueur and yeast buns, fennel seed and cloves, cassia bark and panforte, coffee grounds and blood orange pith. The lingering scent of freshly waxed oil skin. Unctuous and plush, with a fine scattering of gravelly tannins providing some scaffolding to support the sweetness.

Amazingly fresh, with years ahead of it.

Infinitely better than a letter from the Queen.

1915
In April 1915, as the grapes that miraculously live on in this wine were harvested, young men from a young nation were landing on a Turkish beach to confront horrors they never imagined.

They've all gone but a tiny amount of this wine remains.

After 10 decades of slow evaporation, and a commercial release, what little wine remains of the vintages beyond the century mark is transferred to a smaller octave barrel to preserve the unbroken sequence of vintages more than anything else.

To taste this is truly humbling. There's an intensity to this wine that no other in the tasting could match. It has a density that could almost be a singularity. Trying to describe it seems as futile as painting a masterpiece with Whiteout.

But here goes. Treacle, cordite, dutch liquorice, clove - the catch of volatile acidity at the back of the throat.

It's the glacially slow momentum of the wine that really stands out. It hits the palate and then refuses to flow back through the finish, almost as if it's scared of being forgotten.

1878
Where it all began. Benno's vision fulfilled. There's an ethereal beauty to this wine, a poignant sense of time's perpetual progression. Dark toffee, rubbed rosemary, star anise, cloves and candlewax. I like to think he'd be happy with it.

Wines older than 40 years of age may be available for bottling upon request.

Red alert on a grand old winery's classic comeback story

THE AUSTRALIAN WINE
JOHN LEHMANN
CELLAR DIRECTOR

Chateau Tanunda is the greatest comeback story in Australian wine. Once the grandest winery in Australia, this majestic estate, featuring some of the oldest vines in the Barossa, fell into disrepair in the 1990s under the ownership of then wine goliath Southcorp.

The improbable story of its revival comes to my mind this week as Chateau Tanunda's classic grenache-based blend features in a special aged-reds dozen hand-selected by The Australian Wine Club and offered at seriously compelling prices.

Just on the edge of the Barossa's Tanunda township, you can see the peaked tops of a spectacular bluestone building presiding over its vineyard surrounds. Built in the 1880s, in response to Europe's vineyards being decimated by the phylloxera plague, this new-world chateau must have seemed like a faraway fantasyland.

With French winemaker Charles Gelly leading the charge, Chateau Tanunda was an instant global hit, winning the World Intercolonial World Wine Competition only three years after operations began.

Over the decades, a who's who of Australian wine has learnt their craft here: names like Bill Seppelt, Geoff Merrill, Grant Burge, Rockford's Robert O'Callaghan and Yalumba's Kevin Glastonbury.

But by 1998, when wine entrepreneur John Geber cycled past, the chateau's past glories were well and truly in the rear-view mirror, the sprawling compound a ruin of shattered windows, broken roofs and pigeon nests.

But Geber, who was just selling his mass-market wine export brand, Kangaroo Ridge, to Foster's, fell under its spell. He snapped up the estate within a month and has spent the past 20 years investing millions to recapture its magic.

The cellar door, lawns and the Chateau's Grand Ballroom have all been transformed - and even a cricket ground established where international players contest charity matches.

"It's such an awe-inspiring place that Dad obviously saw an opportunity to do something special," says Geber's daughter, Michelle Geber, who took over running Chateau Tanunda in 2018.

The estate now holds nearly 100ha of vineyards in Bethany, Eden Valley, Tanunda and Vine Vale, as well as being home to some of the Barossa's oldest vines dating back to 1858.

Most importantly, under the hand of senior winemaker Neville Rowe, Chateau Tanunda's wines are again being celebrated internationally. The old-fashioned ways still hold true, with the grapes being hand-picked, basket-pressed and neither fined nor filtered.

From its entry-level wines, through to its \$330-a-bottle iconic Everest Shiraz (awarded the world's best shiraz for its first vintage at the International Wine & Spirit Competition), the chateau is producing superb, rich, layered reds that live up to its glorious past.



Chateau Tanunda The Whole Dam Family Grenache Shiraz Carignan Cinsault Mourvedre 2017
A blockbuster of a wine for those who love big, rich reds bursting with flavour. Drawn from French Rhone varieties that thrive in the Barossa: grenache (28%), shiraz (21%), carignan (19%), cinsault (18%) and mourvedre (14%). Intense bouquet of strawberries, black cherries and subtle spice, with deep flavours of vanilla, cinnamon, olives and pepper. PUNCH and powerful. Vegan-friendly. 15% alc. RRP \$40 a bottle. SPECIALS \$29.99 a bottle in any dozen; \$20.82 in aged-reds mixed dozen

Peter Lehmann The Antiquus Barossa Shiraz 2017
A fine example of why it's worth waiting just a few years before drinking big-hearted Aussie shiraz. Lavish and complex, you'll find flavours of dark plums and blueberries and hints of milk, chocolate, coffee and tobacco leaf. Gold at Germany's Mundus Vini Wine Competition 2021. 14.5% alc. RRP \$44 a bottle. SPECIALS \$24.99 a bottle in any dozen; \$20.82 in aged-reds mixed dozen

Allegiance Wines The Artisan Reserve Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon 2014
After seven years in the cellar, please jump right in. Seductive aromas leading to classic Coonawarra cabernet flavours: dark berries, chocolate, cedar and spice, with soft succulent tannins supporting this intense taste. 95 points from Wine Orbit; gold medals at wine shows in London, Spain and China. 14% alc. RRP \$60 a bottle. SPECIALS \$49.99 a bottle in any dozen; \$20.82 in aged-reds mixed dozen

Rolf Binder Hales Barossa Valley Shiraz 2015
Shows us again the complexities that many Barossa reds reveal when given time in the cellar. Medium-bodied but full of flavour. Aromas of blueberries, violets and liquorice lift from the glass, before subtle flavours of anise, hoisin and Chinese spice emerge. Let it breathe. 13.5% alc. RRP \$25 a bottle. SPECIALS \$21.25 a bottle in any dozen; \$20.82 in aged-reds mixed dozen

Pikes The Assemblage Shiraz Mourvedre Grenache 2018
Push northern Rhone-style blend that balances sweetness and savouriness. Grenache brings mulberry and plum aromatics; shiraz delivers a powerful yet soft mid-palate; mourvedre adds a savoury five-spice edge. From Clare's standout 2018 vintage. A "special value" red star from James Halliday. 14% alc. RRP \$26 a bottle. SPECIALS \$19.99 a bottle in any dozen; \$20.82 in aged-reds mixed dozen

Mitchell Sevenhill Vineyard Clare Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2014
A dainty little number. Only 12% in alcohol, but its nose still sings of violets and subtle blue fruits, combining with varietal capsicum notes. Grippy tannins lie ready to meet a tasty osso bucco or slowly cooked lamb ragu. Enjoy now. RRP \$30 a bottle. SPECIALS \$25.50 a bottle in any dozen; \$20.82 in aged-reds mixed dozen

MIXED DOZEN DEAL Two bottles of each aged red: \$20.82 a bottle

Order online or telephone 1300 765 359 Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm AEST. Deals available only while stocks last. The Australian Wine Club is a commercial partnership with Lalthwaites Wine.

