

MOUNT MARY
VINEYARD
YARRA VALLEY

CELLARHAND

Mount Mary through the Decades

I recently had the privilege of participating in a comprehensive Mount Mary Vineyard vertical tasting encompassing 20 vintages of Triolet, 20 of Chardonnay, 20 of Pinot Noir and an epic 30 vintage line-up of Quintet Cabernets. I can think of worse ways to spend a Monday! The Middletons have conducted such tastings in the past, but always as a behind-closed-doors exercise for the winery team.
This time around, in addition to the Mount Mary team, a tiny number of select media and one or two trade customers were invited along. I was thrilled to be among those to secure a 'golden ticket'. It was very much a warts-and-all approach, where all existing vintages would be tasted and the only wines not assessed would be those absent from the Mount Mary cellar or where both bottles drawn up were found to be faulty. A 10am start was followed by an intensive and concentration-sapping day's tasting, only interrupted by a 45-minute lunch break. Last notes were written at 5pm. No rest for the wicked.
It was a brilliant day and a great resource for when people ask about the drinking window of any particular Mount Mary wine. I am sure other notes and reports will emerge from the day, but here are mine. ***– Patrick Walsh***

MOUNT MARY TRIOLET

This was an awe-inspiring bracket that really showed that Triolet is one of the great white wines of Australia for aging. I made the comment that Rieslings of course deliver on this front, sometimes too the odd Chardonnay, forgetting for a nanosecond about Hunter Semillon. Which is precisely how long it took James Halliday to remind me! Phew…

1987 Big, golden, perhaps 'just-past-it' overdone on the nose. But way more youthful on the palate, with waxy nuances, stone fruit flavours and some length. There was apparently a one-bottle-per-customer limit at the time this wine was released. (65% Sauvignon Blanc, 30% Semillon, 5% Muscadelle)

1992 Herbal notes still there, notably from higher Sauvignon Blanc at three-quarters of the blend, with a distinctive stinging nettles character as well. The palate is well integrated, creamy, still with good acidity. Drinks brilliantly well as a 22-year-old Sauvignon-dominated wine. (74% Sauvignon Blanc, 16% Semillon, 10% Muscadelle)

1993 Some creamy nutty notes on the nose. Riper-tasting, fuller palate. Nectar, juicy. More Semillon here, giving a more complex aroma spectrum into orange aromatics. Makes a strong case for the aging power of Semillon in the mix. (66% Sauvignon Blanc, 21% Semillon, 13% Muscadelle)

1994 Really alive with some lifted stony sulphide 'white Bordeaux' character. This smells really great. Palate still retains some primary notes, hints only at this stage of things like white chocolate, biscuit, nuts. Twenty years old and an absolute stunner! (67% Sauvignon Blanc, 24% Semillon, 9% Muscadelle)

1995 This is in a lovely sweet spot aromatically, open and alluring, with violet crumble overlaying lemon cream. The palate is smoking! Not smoky mind you, I mean smokingly good! On the palate it's pure, defined and racy. Intense but poised. Star of the first bracket. (64% Sauvignon Blanc, 28% Semillon, 8% Muscadelle)

1996 Here there are cooler, more vegetative notes. Not as charming as the wine before it but only suffers by comparison. A little less generous than the '95 but plenty of vibrancy and freshness going for it. (75% Sauvignon Blanc, 22% Semillon, 3% Muscadelle)

1998 Some white chocolate, coffee, earth, almost heading towards white Burgundy aromatics. Lovely blossom notes. Seamless palate, long and fresh. Stonefruit fruit notes of white peach, nashi pear. Extremely good. (58% Sauvignon Blanc, 36% Semillon, 6% Muscadelle)

1999 Concentrated, stony, pure nose and one of the most deeply coloured. Aromas a bit dank - into wet earth and moss – but the palate is more pure and tight. Still looking like it has time to evolve. Which is pretty amazing. (69% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Semillon, 6% Muscadelle)

2000 Herbal nettle, some pong and earth. Also quite deeply coloured. Fresh mushroom filament notes. Dense big apply palate, quite fine. Supple. For me lacks the verve and drive of some others. (75% Sauvignon Blanc, 20% Semillon, 5% Muscadelle)

2001 Honeycomb biscuit brioche. Occupies a more obvious space at the moment, more volatility. Apparently this went through full malo. Not one of the best in this line-up; style is a bit out of step. (73% Sauvignon Blanc, 22% Semillon, 5% Muscadelle)

TRIOLET 2nd Bracket

2002 Quite tight and restrained nose, which follows through on the linear and pure palate. Only just starting on its journey really. (74% Sauvignon Blanc, 20% Semillon, 6% Muscadelle)

2003 Cheesy parmesan nose, a slightly corked bottle perhaps, still with good acidity, and not as '2003' as one might expect. Fruit seemingly quite muted by the taint. (69% Sauvignon Blanc, 24% Semillon, 7% Muscadelle)

2004 White chocolate, vanillin notes on the nose leading seamlessly into a palate with a similar profile. Perhaps slightly higher in alcohol than some of the others, a bit more bony, but gets away with it. (63% Sauvignon Blanc, 29% Semillon, 8% Muscadelle)

2005 This looks terrific, with an alluring meaty, spicy nose. This is one where, if served blind, you'd be hard-pushed to pick what it is - as is the case with many, to be fair. Well poised, orange blossom aromatics, dense. This was the first white wine vintage to go to Diam corks. (66% Sauvignon Blanc, 24% Semillon, 10% Muscadelle)

2006 Concentrated pure fruit with spicy hints, deeply coloured. The palate is vibrant and lively,

with great complexity and poise. (66% Sauvignon Blanc, 24% Semillon, 10% Muscadelle)

2008 That sulphidy, pongy character is back here, but it's an attractive nose, getting into smoked meats and charcuterie. Palate still youthful, and looks potentially to be a pretty high-ranking release for the future. (68% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Semillon, 7% Muscadelle)

2009 Tight, closed and pure. No sign of bushfire year character, although some others can see it. Salty and mineral. Possibly not the most complex of the line-up though, to be fair. (48% Sauvignon Blanc, 40% Semillon, 12% Muscadelle)

2010 …as opposed to this which is much more loose-knit and expressive. This too though is hugely powerful, with a quite viscous palate; great power. Could well be one of the greats next time we do this tasting! (58% Sauvignon Blanc, 32% Semillon, 10% Muscadelle)

2011 This is dense, upright and provocative. It's tight and fine and another example of why 2011 is an outstanding white wine year. Has all of the cool season and lacks for nothing. (56% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Semillon, 19% Muscadelle)

2012 Youthful in the extreme in this company, tightly coiled. Looks complex, open, lively, and like it too has a very, very long way to go. (75% Sauvignon Blanc, 11% Semillon, 14% Muscadelle)

CHARDONNAY

Here the second bracket, from 1998, was a lot stronger than the first. A very interesting exercise and there was plenty of discussion and 'what ifs' about how things might have been different with another closure. I guess the obvious point is how come the really old Triolets could look so great under cork. Certainly food for thought. So as a generalisation you could say that Mount Mary Chardonnay cellars very well for up to 15 years; after that it is a bit more variable. Which when you think about it is about as patient as any of us would manage to be with the stuff in a 'real world' context.

1978 Big, golden, oxidised-looking and this certainly proves to be correct. Palate touches on nougat, honeycomb, biscuit and still has acidity; has only been let down by cork.

1985 Slightly cloudy, getting into mushroomy aromas. Has a concentration and openness to it that is still charming. Nutty.

1988 Similar, creamy, a touch finer, toffee notes, rich. Can see that this would once have been something amazing.

1989 The rain year. Has a greater linearity as a result. Leaner, fine, less prominent oxidised characters.

1991 Almost but still not in complete condition. Burnt toffee, grilled nuts. Most interesting of the line-up of Chardonnays thus far.

1992 Looking a bit more lively and open; marmalade nuances, toffee.

1993 Powerful, earthy, orange citrus flavours; chewy.

1995 Mushroomy notes, some remnants of primary fruits. The first of the Chardonnays still clinging on to life.

1996 A bit more fine and pure, but again as with all thus far, looking well past its best.

1997 Again in the orange marmalade/toffee spectrum, perhaps with a touch more vitality

CHARDONNAY 2nd Bracket

1998 As if a switch has been flicked: immediately here we're into another spectrum altogether aromatically. Spicy, stony, earthy nose over medium-yellow colour. Some roasted white root vegetable notes too. I could smell this all day! The palate is right in the zone with still-present lemon fruits across bright acid and persistent minerality. A scintillating start to the bracket. One of the best wines of the day so far. Looking back at it white truffles also emerge on the nose.

1999 Deeply golden coloured, this is also quite beguiling on the nose. Viscous, white chocolate, earth and mushroom, with some oatmeal and brioche. Length is a plus here, too.

2000 More restrained than the previous two in this bracket aromatically; palate too is tighter. Still looks very pure and primary. Will need lots of time to unfurl.

2002 Immediately a lot of interest here on the nose, reminiscent of the complexity of the '98. Broad shouldered but with nicely framing acidity. Cooler year? Perhaps not quite the palate power of some of the best wines, but very lovely right now

2004 Tight, linear. Mineral. Pure. This at 10 years of age is still a baby.

2005 Quite open and more advanced than the 04, with subtle vanilla notes, fragrant, plenty of interest. Would drink this earlier and continue to hold the '04 if I had any of either.

2006 Alluring nose, mocha coffee notes, quite dense, poised. Looks to have a long life ahead of it. Everyone loved this wine on the day

2010 Mushroom filament, exotic nose, very white Burgundy-looking, full, fleshy palate. Drinkability right now, but with plenty of time up its sleeve.

2011 Super finesse, expressive and mineral. Those who wrote off 2011 are going to be disgraced in the future. Disgraced!

2012 Super concentrated and totally racy. Very hard to judge right now but could this be the best of them all. It certainly had enough of everything and not too much of anything.

PINOT NOIR

One of the quotes if the day came predictably from James Halliday who quipped that Pinot Noir is "definitely the only variety tolerated in heaven". I'm sure he won't mind my stealing the line. There were only one or two 'misses' here across 20 years of Mount Mary Pinot Noir. Sometimes dismissed in its youth, you were left in no doubt here about the immense aging potential of Mount Mary Pinot.

1978 Leather, farmyard, varnish. Looks very '78 Burgundy. Can it be so or is my mind playing tricks on me? Sinewy, earthy, chewy, long, this is, quite simply, really bloody good!

1980 Roasted root vegetables, savoury meats on the nose, opening up more and more as it rolls along in the glass. Medium depth and weight on the palate, but still a great bottle.

1984 Briary, brambly fruits. Ultra complex aromas. Medium-weight palate. Supple. Earthy. Plenty to give still.

1985 Pure strawberry compote, intense, and totally Vosne-Romanée. Searing acid even now, but so much going on. This is nearly 30 years old – it's hard to believe its vibrancy and drive.

1988 Leather, earthy, bright fruits. Supple, chewy. Perhaps not quite as vigorous as some in the line-up, but put a bottle of this in front of me with roast duck anytime soon and watch it disappear.

1990 Raspberry/strawberry compote, really elegant fruit, from a huge-berry vintage. A bit more dilute than some others.

1992 A bit wet-earth and mushroomy, toffee. Lacks a bit of oomph on the palate but is certainly very pretty and elegant.

1994 One of the lesser wines, smoky earth pong, spicy oak. Comments about brett. Just doesn't have the complexity of so many of the others.

1995 More muted, less overt nose, harder to pin down. In actual fact the problem here is that it's still only starting to emerge from its primary phase. Definitely continue to hold this one.

1996 Still remarkably primary and also only just starting to evolve, this perhaps looks a bit more hollow than the 1995 at this stage but time will be the judge.

1997 Absolutely lovely spicy, earthy aroma over a cloudy colour in the glass. Palate is right in the zone with a lovely mix of earth, spice, primary and secondary characters. Great depth and concentration. One of the really good ones.

1998 Charming bright primary strawberry fruit notes, powerful expressive wine, just like the '98 Chardonnay was; dense and long. Never really thought of 1998 as one of the really great Mount Mary years. Until today, that is.

2000 Five spice and smoked meat notes. Savoury but juicy as well. Hungry now and this one is really sharpening the appetite! Always a sign of a really good wine!

2002 More clovey, cinnamon notes. Lovely medium-weight elegant style that doesn't lack intensity. A long way to go.

2004 Is this a bit higher alcohol? Stewy fruits, quite concentrated. Dense. First vintage under Diam closure.

2005 Really lovely pure Burgundy-like Pinot nose. Salty minerality. Elegant without actually being mean.

2006 Also immediately imposing on the nose, with maybe a touch more concentration than the '05. Great tannins and intensity. Will be a very long-lived example.

2010 Like the Chardonnay, this is open, overt and complex. More oak than on some at this stage but that probably makes sense. Look forward to seeing this in another five years!

2011 Quite tight, mineral and pure, in no way lacking in intensity, again makes the point about 2011.

2012 Pure, with a long way ahead of it, this is at the same time as open and charming a young wine as I have seen a Mount Mary Pinot on release. Dr John always wanted his Pinots to avoid the 'fruit bomb' syndrome that so many others started to suffer when Pinot started to be 'the thing' in Victoria in the early '90s. It's great to see Sam Middleton continuing this. Definitely a vintage with 20 years ahead of it.

QUINTET

Quintet is probably the first wine that most people think about when it comes to Mount Mary and this tasting provided an awesome insight into why this is the case.

1976 OK so the first wine of the afternoon smells amazingly pure and youthful. Incredibly complex with even some bizarre candied banana notes. This follows through on the palate, with absolutely nothing to suggest that this is a wine approaching 40 years of age. This was the first commercial release of Mount Mary Cabernet. A thrill to have tasted it all these years later. (78% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Cabernet Franc)

1978 Leather, smoke, char; bright brambly fruits underneath. But this is also extremely alive, bright acids, plenty of fruit sweetness and length. (61% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Cabernet Franc, 22% Merlot)

1982 Extremely dense and powerful; very clean and pure. A bit of mushroomy hollowness, if one is to be extremely critical, but apart from that this is quite compelling. (70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Cabernet Franc, 10% Merlot, 6% Malbec)

1983 Lighter, more delicate but a bit more 'barnyardy' and earthy, with some clovey herbal notes. Does not speak of a warm vintage. At all. (61% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Cabernet Franc, 13% Merlot, 12% Malbec)

1984 A bit creamy, toasty, caramel, some spirity whiffs and cheesy notes. Higher acid, leaner and less plump vintage but definitely a great drink still. (58% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Cabernet Franc, 11% Merlot, 12% Malbec)

1985 A tiny bit corky? Leaner, less voluptuous vintage. Fragrant but a little thin. (58% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc, 14% Merlot, 8% Malbec)

1986 This and the 1988 are immediately appealing aromatically in this quintet of vintages - as well, surprisingly, as the 1989. Always had 1986 in my mind as one of the greats, going back to when we had it on the wine list at Browns in Armadale in the late 80s for around $50. I wasn't wrong. (52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Cabernet Franc, 22% Merlot, 11% Malbec)

1987 This one is a tiny bit bretty and pongy? Also on the palate, which takes it very much in a Left Bank Bordeaux direction and is quite charming in a way. (45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Cabernet Franc, 27% Merlot, 9% Malbec)

1988 Washed-rind cheese on the nose, great drive, power and acidity on the palate. Powerful and still very youthful. Very charming now. (62% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Cabernet Franc, 16% Merlot, 5% Malbec, 1% Petit Verdot)

1989 Toffeed, leathery caramel nutty nose - an unusual descriptor for a Cabernet blend. Like the palate profile here, heading more to Burgundy than Bordeaux. Soft, supple. (62% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Cabernet Franc, 17% Merlot, 4.5% Malbec, 1.5% Petit Verdot)

QUINTET 2nd Bracket

1990 Here the nose is quite soy, meaty, earthy. This follows through on the palate; plenty of latent power, and shows much better than the '90 Pinot did. (42% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Cabernet Franc, 23% Merlot, 9% Malbec, 3% Petit Verdot)

1991 Complex secondary meets primary, brighter, more pure fruits than the '90, but no less complex. If I recall correctly this suffered by comparison to the more vaunted '90 vintage on release. The same can't be said now. (44% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Cabernet Franc, 21% Merlot, 7% Malbec, 5% Petit Verdot)

1992 Inky, intense, pure, cooler. Again a fair degree of concentration, depth and complexity from a so-called lesser year. (41% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Cabernet Franc, 24% Merlot, 10% Malbec, 3% Petit Verdot)

1993 Opulent ripe fruits, but there does seem to be a hint of brett here that possibly strips away some of the intensity. (45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc, 22% Merlot, 10% Malbec, 3% Petit Verdot)

1994 Very, very good nose; complex and savoury. Really sweet fruits. Still plenty of fuel in the tank here. (43% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc, 25% Merlot, 7% Malbec, 5% Petit Verdot)

1995 Tiny question over cork here, maybe not, but a lot going on in behind. Pencil shavings in a nice savoury way. A lot of length here. (41% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Cabernet Franc, 23% Merlot, 7% Malbec, 6% Petit Verdot)

1996 Looks dense and composed with some dry herbs and floral notes. Big palate, silky and long. A five star wine for sure. (49% Cabernet Sauvignon, 21% Cabernet Franc, 18% Merlot, 8% Malbec, 4% Petit Verdot)

1997 Another very good one. Charry oak, dark fruit compote. Really alive and at a lovely spot in its life. Overt, fragrant, juicy. (43.5% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19.5% Cabernet Franc, 19.5% Merlot, 7.5% Malbec, 10% Petit Verdot)

1999 Big savoury earthy nose. A bit blocky and angular and certainly not as seamless as some, but has time its side and may well come around. (66% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Cabernet Franc, 11% Merlot, 6% Malbec, 5% Petit Verdot)

2000 Really inky and pure, huge intensity. One of the best wines of the bracket. Opulent and complex. Classic Quintet! (56% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Cabernet Franc, 16% Merlot, 9% Malbec, 6% Petit Verdot)

2001 Muted subtle aromatics. Earthy, pongy notes. The palate has strong acidity and good depth. Not among the greatest but far from disgraced. (63% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Cabernet Franc, 13% Merlot, 5% Malbec, 2% Petit Verdot)

2002 Milk chocolate/mocha, charming nose. The palate is quite opulent, plenty of fruit depth from a warmer year (?), good length. (70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Cabernet Franc, 9% Merlot, 2% Malbec, 4% Petit Verdot)

2003 Smoky meat, savoury charcuterie. Has the intensity that the 2003 Pinot lacked. Intense and nothing to suggest it was other than a great year. (66% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Cabernet Franc, 10% Merlot, 4% Malbec, 4% Petit Verdot)

2004 Floral, muted, but quite pure. With time starts to reveal spiced meat notes. Dense. (66% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Cabernet Franc, 11% Merlot, 3% Malbec, 3% Petit Verdot)

2005 Soy, aniseed, herbal. Charry palate, chewy, herbal. Not as generous as some but may soften in time? (48% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Cabernet Franc, 26% Merlot, 5% Malbec, 3% Petit Verdot)

2006 Dry herbs and intense. Straw-in-summer vibrancy. Incredibly pure and focused, supreme length. (50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Cabernet Franc, 26% Merlot, 3% Malbec, 3% Petit Verdot)

2008 Open, quite jammy fruits. Cola. Loose knit and vibrant as well. Acid build-up is hurting by now but even so this wine looks really good. (44% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Cabernet Franc, 30% Merlot, 7% Malbec, 4% Petit Verdot)

2010 Ripe and rounded on the nose. Blood oranges. Really vibrant, crunchy and pure. Everything in its place already. (47% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Cabernet Franc, 30% Merlot, 4% Malbec, 5% Petit Verdot)

2011 Plenty of depth, interest and complexity. Salumi notes. Fleshy, more Bourgogne than Bordeaux, supple, juicy. (49% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Cabernet Franc, 27% Merlot, 6% Malbec, 5% Petit Verdot)

2012 Really vibrantly aromatic, extremely powerful nose. Dense and overt, very powerful, in fact as full-on in a good way as anything that has come before it. (42% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Cabernet Franc, 33% Merlot, 4% Malbec, 4% Petit Verdot)