



The future makers

Australian wines for
the 21st century

Max Allen

Highbank

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Highbank is one of the least-known of all Coonawarra's vineyards, and yet it produces what I think are some of the region's most refined, elegant and ageworthy wines. Tasting the Highbank Coonawarra red (a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc) after a few years in the cellar have imbued it with a gentle perfume of cedar and cassis, you're reminded that fine, elegant, ageworthy wines like this were once considered the truest expression of the cool region's legendary terroir of terra rossa red soil over limestone. And what makes these wines different is the viticulture: in stark contrast to every other vineyard in Coonawarra, the Highbank vineyard is run using organic principles.

Dennis and Bonnie Vice, by contrast, have farmed their 4-hectare vineyard right in the heart of that terra rossa strip organically since they established the place in the mid-1980s. Dennis's soft Californian accent is familiar to many grape growers and winemakers through his time as a viticulture lecturer in Adelaide in the early-1990s. He is also a well-known face in the organic field from his time as a certification officer for NASAA. He says that while he and Bonnie's approach to growing grapes has been viewed with some suspicion by the neighbours for most of the last quarter century, there are some signs that Coonawarra might be turning

a little green. Rymill, for example, have adopted a sustainable viticulture program that aims to reduce chemical inputs and replace them with softer, biological sprays where possible; and Patrick T viticulturist Rex Hutchison has adopted a number of biological, organic and even biodynamic techniques such as making and spreading compost, planting permanent grass swards between the vine rows to out-compete the weeds, spraying beneficial microbes onto the vines, and even putting out biodynamic preparation 500 through the undervine dripper lines.

Until a few years ago, the Highbank wines were made under the supervision of Trevor Mast at Mount Langi Ghiran in the Grampians, a few hours' drive east, across the Victorian border. Now, they're made at Paracombe in the Adelaide Hills, where Dennis is also involved in the new label, Protero, whose wines are made by Paracombe's Paul Drogemuller and the peripatetic Steve Pannell.

While the winemaking location might have changed, the winemaking philosophy for Highbank stays the same: low-yielding fruit from hand-pruned vines, hand-picked and fermented gently, with minimal additions (certainly no tannin), a short, ten-month stay in French oak, and then bottling with relatively low SO₂. All the better to let the land do all the talking in the glass.