

The Wine Magazine April/May 99 by Max Allen Heathcote

Look at a map of central Victoria. Find the small town of Heathcote, roughly in the middle of the state, just south-east of Bendigo. Follow the Northern Highway until you reach Elmore, turn east on the Midland Highway towards Corop, then south again on the Rochester Road, back to Heathcote. Within this long, thin, upside-down trainable (and occasionally spilling out from the sides of it) can be found some of the most exciting grape-growing dirt in Australia.

This is Cambrian soil, russet earth formed over 600 million years as two geological faults pulverized each other incessantly. It starts appearing south of the Heathcote township, wines up through the valley of Ladys Pass, then breaks the surface dramatically at the soft, rounded peak of Mt Camel, continuing on up the eastern and western slopes of the Colbinabbin Range.

Until recently, this streak of Cambrian soil had been annexed by two regions: the southern bit near the Heathcote township was part of Bendigo, while the northern bit had been claimed by the Goulburn Valley. But earlier this year, the Heathcote grape-growers decided to take the plunge and secede. Neither of their former parent regions put up a fight, because the case the Heathcote vignerons have for distinct regional identity is undoubtedly one of the strongest in the country.

You see, the red wines (shiraz, mostly) made from grapes grown in this deep Cambrian soil have something that sets them apart. They are unusually deep in colour, and this depth of colour remains stable for an unusually long time. Flavour, too – inky dark, ripe and black – seems to be present in uncommon volume.

For the technically minded, it has something to do with the high potassium levels in the soil resulting in low pH fruit, something to do with the warm, reliable, dry climate, and something to do with the great depth of the soil resulting in good root penetration.

Whatever the secret is, it's out. In the past five years, over 160ha of vines have been planted on both sides of the Colbinabbin Range alone, with another 40, at least, due to go in by the end of this year. And then there are the established vineyards down near the town of Heathcote which are expanding.

“The joint's jumping up there,” says Heathcote's best-known winemaker Ron Laughton of Jasper Hill. Laughton is one of the jumpers. He has not only entered into a joint venture with Rhone Valley winemaker Marc Chapoutier to make wine from shiraz vines planted next to his own property, but also has bought one of the best clocks on the range near Mt Camel. “But then, if ever an area had a reason for existence, Heathcote's red soil has a reason for existence,” he says.

Many others share Laughton's view of the region's manifest destiny. At the southern end of the Colbinabbin Range, at the foot of Mount Camel, much of the 30ha of vineyards belonging to Hunter Valley wine company Tyrrell's are bearing their third crop this year. Smaller vineyards contracted to Macedon winery Hanging Rock are doing the same.

Both producers have recently released massive, inky, glorious 1997 Heathcote shirazes, both first-crop wines from their new vineyards. The Tyrrell's (labeled as Rufus Stone) is intensely fragrant and darkly fruit, the Hanging Rock is oaky but spicy and superbly structured. Both are glowing beacons of this region's winemaking potential.

Up near Lake Cooper, in the north of the triangle, the Shelmerdine family, one of the founders of Mitchelton, has finally returned to warm-climate viticulture with 36ha of vines. While it is their initial intention to sell the fruit, a new label is not out of the question. Another old hand, Yarra Ridge founder Louis Bialkower, has also re-entered the fray, buying a big block of ground next door to Jasper Hill.

A little to the north of the Shelmerdine development, though, is the biggest vineyard of them all. Brown Brothers has purchased a huge block of land and is in the process of planting a staggering 175ha of vines. The company has named this new development Patricia's Vineyard, in recognition of the huge part Pat Brown has played in the family company's success over the past 60 years. Like most wine companies in the region, Brown Brothers is planting red grapes: shiraz and merlot at first, but after that, in typically pioneering Brown Brothers spirit, less mainstream varieties such as petit verdot, sangiovese, zinfandel and durif. Even the Spanish red grapes tempranillo and graciano and the wonderful, obscure southern-Italian grape aglianico get a look in. Watch this space.

But it's not only the experienced players who are planting vines. Many locals and newcomers are learning about viticulture the hard way, through trial and error. And one of these is Ian Rathjen, fifth-generation Colbinabbin farmer who has been bitten by the wine bug big-time.

Rathjen first thought about planting vines 20 years ago, but didn't have the right bit of land. His family had owned much of the black-soil land to the east of the road since settling in the 1850's, but it wasn't until the mid-1990's that the hill on the western side, with its easterly aspect and red soil came up for sale (the land is tightly held by the local farmers and land prices have quadrupled now people are beginning to plant vines).

Almost immediately after buying this prime piece of land, 16ha of vines went in. Rathjen is selling his fruit to a grateful Hardy's now. But with the unmistakable and dangerous flint in his eye that fills his wife Lynn with dread, Ian Rathjen keeps talking about one day making his own.

If he does, he'll probably do well, because winemaking is in the Rathjen blood. A century ago, the Rathjen family had a vineyard on the site of the family property just down the road, where his mother and father still live. The wines won prizes but the vines were pulled in 1920 (the then-Mrs Rathjen rather inconveniently didn't drink).

The old wine cellar is still there. A steep ramp takes you down into the earth beneath a crumbling shack. Everything is covered in the fine red dust: thick, rough-hewn beams, an old trap, even ancient chalk graffiti that the family keep alive by re-chalking every now and then. Ian's father Fin points to his father's and his grandfather's signatures inscribed on the back of a door, and various phrases scrawled

on the beams. Some are playful: “Would you like a drink? Oh yes”, some philosophical: “Enough was as good as a feast”; some cheeky: “Don’t tell mother”. The cellar is suddenly full of ghosts.

Fin and one of his other sons, Darryl, have also become grape-growers and have established a new vineyard on the site of the old.

There are problems that the growers in this areas will need to face. One is salinity. There is water here, but finding clean, useable sources isn’t always easy. At least one of the bores that Tyrrell’s sank when setting up its vineyard yielded copious quantities of the precious liquid – but it was saltier than the sea (a major reason why the company installed seven kilometers of pipe to pump water from the nearby Waranga Channel).

Tyrrell’s can console itself with the knowledge that water may not be required all that often once the vines are established. A swift look at the relative health (and naturally low yields of extremely high-quality grapes) of the dry-grown Jasper Hill vineyards in the height of summer is proof enough of this.

The other problem may be more severe: phylloxera, the potentially disastrous vine louse, is but a hop, skip and a jump away. The southern end of Heathcote is just 56km from the Goulburn Valley, one of Victoria’s designated phylloxera zones. And at least one of the large new Mt Camel vineyards will be selling grapes to wineries in the Goulburn Valley and the other phylloxera zones to the north, the King Valley.

The new growers are, on the whole, experienced professionals and well aware of this problem. Brown Brothers viticulturist Mark Walpole (a veteran of working within a phylloxera zone) is careful to point out that Patricia’s vineyard will be run autonomously: a whole new set of trucks, tractors and machine harvesters must be bought that will never leave the region. Many others are planting, if not all then a majority of, their vineyards on phylloxera-resistant root stocks. And there are rumours of one winemaker in the region planning to set up a processing facility within the boundaries to crush much of the future production: a kind of vinous quarantine.

It’s hard to think about that now, though. Driving up the Rochester Road with Mt Camel and the Colbinabbin Range to your left, it is easier to imagine that one day a continuous green strip of vineyards will cover these gentle slopes instead of the large swathes of sun-bleached scrub covering them today.

Somehow, that day doesn’t seem too far off.

Will Heathcote’s reputation survive its changed borders?