

THE HUNTER BECOMES THE HUNTED.

THE HUNTER VALLEY
IN NEW SOUTH WALES
IS IN HOT DEMAND.

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Looking across the vineyards
at Mount Pleasant Wines.



THE REDS ARE THE BEST THEY'VE SEEN IN YEARS; THE WHITES TRUMP THE REDS. YIELDS ARE UP; YIELDS ARE DOWN...

We chatted to Hunter Valley winemakers as they brought in the last of their 2017 grapes and although the catch-cry varied between wineries, one thing was constant: despite being a hot, fast vintage, 2017 is shaping up to be a cracker.

There's a renewed vitality pulsing through the Valley – and it's not just thanks to the current bottlings. Local wineries are still riding high following the 2014 vintage, regarded as one of the best in 50 years, and the thirst for Hunter wines has never been greater.

The shape of 2017

If you kept an eye on this summer's weather reports, 2017 looked like a punishing year in the Hunter, with temperatures frequently soaring above 40 degrees. Yet rather than bemoan the climate, local winemakers are hailing this vintage as one of their best yet.

Out at Broke, Andrew Margan of Margan Wines puts things in perspective. "When I look at what's in the winery, I think the heat has been tougher on the people than the vines," he says.

Andrew Thomas of Thomas Wines is equally unfazed. "I'd rather it be stinking hot than pissing down rain," he says. Andrew had just brought in the last of his shiraz when we chat. "I can see the light at the end of the tunnel and it looks amazing. It's going to be a great red year."

For Jim Chatto, chief winemaker at McWilliam's Mount Pleasant, 2017 has been an "interesting" vintage. "Our crops were a bit lower than we expected... Due to the dry heat, the bunches didn't quite fill out, but the quality and intensity is great," he says. "Our whites are looking better than our benchmark of the past 50 years, which was the 2014 vintage. And our reds are strong, though not as good as the 2014s."

Just up the road, Usher Tinkler is equally enthusiastic about his whites. "The semillon and chardonnay are in textbook condition," he says. "I'd have loved to leave the reds on for another week, but we didn't want 18-baume wines."

And while quality may be on par with the 2014s, for many wineries there's one major difference: volume. As Usher explains, "2014 was such a good year for the Hunter and this year is looking even better, plus we have a lot more stock."

Andrew Margan agrees, despite it being one of their shortest vintages. "The fruit is beautiful, and both the quantity and quality are up," he says. 🍷



hunter valley

“We know the challenges of the climate and what the vines are capable of – it’s never going to be a high-yield region,” says Jessica McLeish of McLeish Estate. “But this is one of the best we’ve seen. We’re pulling in 65 to 75 tonnes and we haven’t had to thin out any of the fruit. 2014 is the one to chase and I think we’ve got that this year.”

Andrew Thomas is also capitalising on the current crop. “There was a feeding frenzy when we released the 2014 reds – the flagship KISS Shiraz sold out in six weeks,” he recalls. “The beauty of this awesome vintage is that I’ve had the chance to increase my production – I’ve gone long on shiraz for 2017.”

A signature Hunter style

It’s just as well production is up, because the appetite for Hunter wines is bigger than ever, as wineries refocus on what the region does best.

A rich history of medium-bodied, savoury reds was one of the key reasons Jim Chatto joined Mount Pleasant in 2012. “Up until the 1960s, the Hunter Valley was making the best reds in Australia, and it feels like in the past five to six years we’ve started owning our terroir again – we’re not trying to be something we’re not,” he says.

Rather than attempt to compete with the Barossa and McLaren Vale’s full-bodied reds, Hunter winemakers are returning to the region’s roots. “We all got caught up in the ‘Parkerisation’ of wine and were guilty of chasing bigger styles, but what the Hunter does better than anyone else is medium-bodied reds that are savoury rather than spicy.”

As Andrew Margan says, “Gone are the days of sweaty saddle

and battery acid. There’s a new generation of winemakers who are producing more contemporary styles.”

One such winemaker is Usher Tinkler, whose family has been in the Hunter for more than 100 years; he launched his own label in 2015. “The region seems to be having a revival,” he says. “It’s making a comeback with its chardonnays and its light, savoury reds, such as the shiraz pinot noir blends.” The latter heralds a return to the glory days of Hunter wine. In the mid-20th century, the region’s most noteworthy reds were shiraz pinot blends, famously dubbed ‘Hunter River Burgundy’. And while the marriage fell out of favour for decades, Usher and his contemporaries have brought it back to the fore.

“The Shiraz Pinot Noir has become a big part of our portfolio,” says Shaun Silkman of Silkman Wines. “People always look a bit odd when you first offer it to them, but they love it when they try it.”

Shaun also grew up in a Hunter winemaking family, and together with his wife Liz – 2006 Dux of the Len Evans Tutorial, and Hunter Valley Winemaker of the Year in 2011 – launched Silkman Wines in 2013. The duo has a keen sense of the current drinking zeitgeist, and craft their award-winning wines accordingly. “Consumers are looking for lower alcohol, more fruit-driven and more food-friendly wines, and these are the style that we and the Hunter as a whole really play into,” Shaun says.

The region’s natural affinity with medium-bodied, savoury reds didn’t escape Andrew Margan, who first planted barbera

ON TOUR IN THE HUNTER



To explore the Hunter’s 150-odd wineries, base yourself in the central hub of Pokolbin. Start with a visit to James Halliday’s 2017 Winery of the Year,

McWilliam’s Mount Pleasant Estate (401 Marrowbone Rd, mountpleasantwines.com.au), where winemaker Jim Chatto pays homage to the history of this vineyard and Hunter legend Maurice O’Shea with outstanding single-block shiraz and semillon. Just up the road, **Usher Tinkler’s** cellar door (97 McDonald’s Rd, ushertinklerwines.com.au) is housed in a restored chapel,

offering relaxed tastings of the easy-drinking Nose to Tail range and Reserve Chardonnay and Shiraz, plus bountiful cheese and salumi platters.

Next door at **GunDog Estate** (101 McDonald’s Rd, gundogestate.com.au), try Matt Burton’s rich and complex Rare Game Hunter Valley Shiraz and refined The Chase Semillon.

Take a left at De Beyers Road for **Tulloch Wines** (638 De Beyers Rd, tullochwines.com), where a host of tasting experiences await, including a mystery wine tour,

wine and chocolate indulgence, and museum-release wine flights.

At **Audrey Wilkinson** (750 De Beyers Rd, audreywilkinson.com.au), discover one of the best views in the region and two chic cottages for accommodation in the heart of the Valley. The Wilkinson family first settled here in 1866, but winemaker Jeff Byrne brings things bang up to date with his cellar-worthy shiraz and textural chardonnay.

Or turn right for **McLeish Estate** (462 De Beyers Rd, mcleishstatewines.com.au), where Andrew Thomas has been

making the estate-grown wines for the past 17 years, including their gold-medal-emblazoned semillon.

Further along, **Harkham Wine** (266 De Beyers Rd, harkhamwine.com) produces natural, minimal-intervention semillon, chardonnay and shiraz that are the darlings of the Sydney restaurant scene.

Loop back to **Lake’s Folly** (2416 Broke Rd, lakesfolly.com.au), for Rodney Kempe’s distinctive cabernet blend and chardonnay. With a loyal following and only



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4500 dozen made, the wines tend to sell out each vintage, so check the chalkboard out the front to see if it's open. Visit the **Small Winemakers Centre** (426 McDonald's Rd, smallwinemakers.com.au) for tastings of Silkman Wines, Hart & Hunter and The Little Wine Company. Then pop across the road to Brokenwood Wines or around the corner to Meerea Park for elegant shiraz, fine-boned semillon and full-flavoured chardonnay. At **David Hook Wines** (cnr Broke and Ekerts rds, davidhookwines.



com.au) seek out the Old Vines Pothana Semillon or savoury De Novo Rosso blend of barbera, nebbiolo and sangiovese.

Hunter icon **Tyrrell's Wines** (1838 Broke Rd, tyrrells.com.au) is next, pouring an extensive array of wines from the Hunter and beyond, including the revered Vat 1 Semillon off 94-year-old vines. Fine examples of Hunter semillon, chardonnay and shiraz are on show at **Leogate Estate's** (1693 Broke Rd, leogate.com.au) opulent cellar door, and **De**



in the Broke-Fordwich sub-region back in 1998 using cuttings from Carlo Corino's Montrose vineyard in Mudgee. "He'd smuggled cuttings from Piedmont in his suitcase back in the 1970s, so I was pretty excited to get my hands on them," says Andrew. "The high acidity, savouriness and medium-bodied characters appealed to me, and given the fact that we are in a lower-yield, lower-vigour area, I thought it would all come together nicely."

More recently, Andrew has inter-planted tempranillo, graciano and shiraz. "I love the rusticity of Spanish wines and that savouriness the Hunter can achieve," he says. Andrew also looked to Spain when expanding his white portfolio. "I did the Camino de Santiago a few times through Rias Baixas, so I had a lot of experience with albarino. It typically produces lower alcohol, higher acid, textured whites, and I could see incredible comparisons between it and Hunter semillon. I've now had two vintages of albarino and it's doing everything I imagined it would," he says. Andrew produces these alternative varieties under his Breaking Ground label. Usher Tinkler is also charting new territory with his La Volpe Prosecco, a first for the Hunter. "We grafted garganega onto old semillon vines. If you read the textbooks it shouldn't work, but they have similar water requirements and growing patterns," he explains. "Our prosecco is going crazy - we can't keep up with demand. We'll probably graft more semillon over in the coming years."

All of which points to exciting times ahead for Australia's oldest wine region. ●

L-R: Mount Pleasant's Lovedale vineyard; Usher Tinkler wine and charcuterie; inside Usher Tinkler Wines cellar door; Bob McLeish in McLeish Estate's vineyards; Harkham Wine mid-harvest; Andrew Thomas; the coveted Braemore vineyard; Andrew Margan of Margan Wines.



Iulius's (1616 Broke Rd, dewine.com.au) modern, minimalist abode. Enhance your tasting with a matched charcuterie or cheese platter. Take a seat on the expansive balcony at **Keith Tulloch** (cnr Hermitage and Deasys Rd, keithtullochwine.com.au) for a tutored tasting overlooking grapevines and the Brokenback Mountain Range, followed by lunch at neighbouring **Muse Kitchen**. Nearby, **Thomas Wines** (cnr Hermitage Rd and Mistletoe Ln, thomaswines.com.au) promises

a sleek, sophisticated setting for Andrew Thomas' exceptional semillon and shiraz. Beyond Pokolbin, head to Broke for one of the Valley's best food and wine experiences at **Margan Wines** (1238 Millbrodale Rd, margan.com.au), serving farm-to-table fare alongside Andrew Margan's stellar wines. Other Hunter restaurants of note include Troy Rhoades-Brown's two-hatted **Muse**, the memorable degustations at **EXP**, laid-back Italian at **Lillino's** at St Clements Estate, and refined French dining at **Bistro Molines**.