



Left, Daniel Honan visits some Hunter Valley vineyards



CHARCOAL STREAKS:

The Hunter Valley

The Hunter Valley is the oldest wine region in Australia, spanning as far back as 1825 when James Busby, 'godfather' of the Australian wine industry, planted vines near Branxton from cuttings he'd made from ancient vineyard sites in Europe. *By Daniel Honan*

Included in the cuttings was a vitis variety called Syrah, from the Northern Rhône appellation in France. Today, in Australia, we call the same vitis shiraz.

Hunter Valley shiraz offers a unique wine experience, unlike its bold barossa brethren in South Australia, Hunter shiraz is more restrained, less shouty and a whole lot softer.

Still full of the typical big spice and black pepper notes, Hunter shiraz has a more grounded feel to it; it is somehow more elegant and earthy, something that winemaker, Richard Harkam describes as the "the charcoal streak".

Richard and his father Terry Harkham established Harkham Windarra in 2005, both hailing from a winemaking family from Zichron Yaakov, in Israel, one of the oldest wine making regions in the world.

Harkham wines are made completely preservative free and are born from a mix grapes grown organically in their own on-site shiraz vineyard, and a further 10 per cent come from rented vineyard blocks in the surrounding areas. These vineyards sit on predominately red clay and graveled soils providing that typical Hunter Valley earthiness.

When I spoke to Richard at the grand opening of his brand new cellar door for Harkham Wines, and adjoining restaurant, Casa Margarita in the heart of Hunter Valley wine country, he explained that his passion for Hunter shiraz is based around “the purity of flavour coming from the dark purple fruits, intermixed with that consistent, and defining charcoal streak”.

“For me, the Hunter Valley has the best grapes in Australia, easily... it’s three dimensional. We have the full spectrum of flavour, from the deep black peppers that provide a base and grip, right through to the sweet fruit flavours of cassis and mulberry... all are balanced with an elegance that is not seen anywhere else in Australia,” he said.

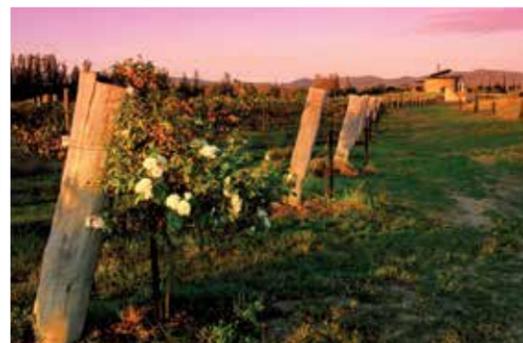
Richard refuses to make any synthetic additions to his wines, and does not use fining or filtration methods, preferring, instead to “let the grapes speak for themselves”. Through this ancient philosophy of natural winemaking, Richard is able to achieve a pure expression of the fruit born from the vines that grow out of the Hunter Valley’s unique soils.

Tasting Harkham’s full range of shiraz is like being on a geology expedition, where your tongue becomes the shovel digging through the deep layers of darkness and light that defines the unique soil strata of the Hunter.

The 2012 Harkham Rosé, made from shiraz where the skin contact is even less than usual, is a dry Provençal style wine that utters strawberry and rose petals scents on the nose, while allowing for a crisp juicy flavour on the palate, with a lingering, gentle sweet finish that ghosts in the mouth for a long while after.

The 2011 Shiraz Nouveau is a Beaujolais inspired wine, made using carbonic maceration, and bunches of wild ferment that helps to produce a drop of stunning fruit flavours from toffee blackberries and raspberry, and also allows for more subtle flavourings that hint at tea and oak.

The centre of Harkham Wines shiraz stratum is Aziza’s Shiraz. Named in honour of Richard’s



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Grandmother, Aziza Harkham, who inspired Richard’s love of great natural wine.

The 2012 Aziza’s Shiraz is a bright young thing bursting with earnest promise balanced on a solid history of Hunter Valley heritage. Black fruits and definite streaks of charcoal earthiness help to bring elegance to this shiraz. Predominately fruit driven, the wine burns with the same enthusiasm and energy that Richard radiates in spades and is an excellent, balanced, example of minimal interventionist winemaking from great quality fruit.

The final layer on our geological journey was the 2011 Old Vines Shiraz. A deep rich and earthly example of black fruit, cassis and mulberry, caged within a solid structure of quality oak, spice, and tannin. At once, it speaks

of the past, present and future of Hunter shiraz – the unmistakable history and heritage presented in a fresh and natural way.

Using ancient winemaking methods, minimal intervention and no sulphur, Richard Harkham’s wines are an honest reflection of the “amazing terroir driven flavours that the Hunter Valley is renowned for”.

Harkham Cellar Door is now open on weekends, and by appointment only throughout the week.

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