

# wine

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## Where the vines are God's work

Caring for kosher grapes has its challenges for the team at Harkham Wines in the Hunter Valley.

**I**n a world-class wine region too often overshadowed by its reputation for music festivals, party buses and colossal corporate enterprise, Harkham Wines is a breath of fresh air for the Hunter Valley.

Owner and winemaker Richard Harkham beams on arrival, drawing attention from the picturesque vista of the Brokenback range to a modest cellar door. It's an ideal setting for this small, family-run operation. Only single-vineyard varietal wines are to be found here: harvested by hand, fermented without chemicals, additives or preservatives, unfinned, unfiltered and, to top things off, certified kosher.

Being the only fully kosher-committed winery in Australasia is no stroll in the vines for Harkham. Most commercially available kosher wines are boiled before bottling, which has a drastic effect on their flavour and structure, clearly not an option at Harkham. Here, the grape's transformation from fruit to wine begins the moment its skin is broken (that rules out machine harvesting), from which point, strict procedural sanctions must be observed to preserve the wine's holiness. Only Sabbath-observing Jews, accompanied by a certified rabbinical supervisor, are allowed to handle the fruit, juice and winemaking equipment. Any physical contact from an outsider would render the wine un-kosher. To make things more complicated, all work in the winery must cease from sunset on Friday until Saturday evening in accordance with Shabbat. The winery is kept under lock and key during this time.

The keeper of those keys at Harkham is kosher supervisor Avi. Not the black-robed, extravagantly side-burned holy man one might expect, but a quietly spoken chap, practically garbed for the labours of winery work, a wine-stained T-shirt, sneakers and an infectious smile. Avi is highly observant, employed by the Kashrut Authority to

oversee all aspects of the winemaking process, including the surveillance of visitors, ensuring no physical contact is made. A short ladder climb for a peek into the fermentation chambers would be an unnervingly tense experience under the kosher supervisor's gaze. One slip would mean a tragic end for 7000 litres of this year's Aziza's Shiraz, and almost certainly, one curious journalist.

But kosher compliance is only half the story at the winery. Harkham talks of the similarities between kosher and natural winemaking in terms of both process and ethos, alluding to the strict limits on inoculated yeasts, additives, preservatives, fining and filtering.

"If it's kosher, it's already halfway there." Meticulous vineyard management and fastidious hand-picking and sorting ensure that only the highest-quality fruit makes it to the vats, at which point the winemaker steps back. Limiting human control highlights the qualities of a natural fermentation process, imbuing the wine with an unadulterated snapshot of time and place.

"At Harkham, we don't make wine. "We are about helping the grapes be the best wine they can be. We see ourselves as shepherds - custodians of a very holy thing," Harkham says.

In a small room of the winery, surrounded by heirlooms and mementoes, past generations peer down from family portraits. Harkham's winemaking history begins with his grandmother, Aziza. Growing up in the Israeli wine region of Zichron Ya'acov, Aziza made wine for her family in the 1950s in a two-bedroom tin shack occupied by 10 people, with no electricity or running water. Then grapes were "borrowed" from the neighbouring estate - vines established by the late Baron Edmond de Rothschild with cuttings from Chateau Lafite Rothschild. With great fruit and a hands-off approach, Aziza brought joy



Grape lengths (from top): Harkham Wines is set in a picturesque part of the Hunter Valley. Owner and winemaker Richard Harkham: "We see ourselves as shepherds - custodians of a very holy thing."

### Aziza's Semillon 2014

An iconoclastic take on the Hunter Valley's darling varietal, this is not an austere acid bomb, but a deeply fleshy barrel-fermented expression, showing ripe tropical fruit and grapefruit pith, with gentle acid and a long, savoury finish.

### Aziza's Shiraz 2014

Vibrant and honest, showing plenty of blueberry and dark cherry, with aromas of dried violets and crushed earth, it is the result of gentle extraction, plenty of stem inclusion, and cool fermentation temperatures. Wild yeast brings an alluring smoked meat-like complexity. Sold out everywhere but the cellar door, this is the only NSW wine included on the Noma Sydney wine list. Definitely one for the boot.

to the family home. Her name now graces the bottles of the Harkham flagship range.

With favourable reviews and international demand, it is hard to find any of the Harkham wines without visiting the cellar door or a top Sydney restaurant, but it hasn't all been smooth sailing.

Harkham speaks of the tough early years

and the career lowlight of spilling an entire vat on the winery's debut vintage (there was no Shiraz in 2005). Through hard times and heartbreak, lessons have been learnt.

The trajectory towards sulphur-free winemaking can be traced to one afternoon when, with an abundance of work still ahead of them, Harkham and his father, Terry, began the task of racking - moving wine from one vessel to another to remove residual solids, invariably leaving behind some of the precious liquid.

Like many people from large families, Harkham's father doesn't like to see anything wasted, so, decanting himself a couple of litres, he uncharacteristically sculled the lot. Later, he was found sleeping under a barrel. Terry was in charge of adding sulphur to the fruit bins that day.

The no-sulphur-dioxide approach, along with many other unconventional methods, set these wines apart in the Hunter Valley. After a testing 2015 vintage, battered by summer rains, hail and downy mildew, many winemakers in the region are sourcing fruit elsewhere. For Harkham, yields are down, but quality is high. An addition to the range this year will be a Beaujolais-style, carbonic maceration Shiraz - flamboyantly aromatic, with big, bright fruit. The 2015 vintage wines are due for release in July.