

The Border Mail

A barrel of possibilities

By DI THOMAS
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Liz Barnes, viticulturist Brett Barnes, and Il Kachi's Roger Rourke taste the 2013 Elements Shiraz, which is ageing in red gum barrels. Picture: KYLIE ESLER

IT may just be one of the best kept secrets in the Australian wine industry; an innovation in the barrel fermentation of handcrafted shiraz taking place right here in the North East.

But word is getting out quickly about Star Lane Winery's 2012 Elements Shiraz, uniquely aged in recycled Australian red gum barrels, and there's already plenty of interest from growing wine markets in Japan and China for the boutique offering.

Wooragee couple Brett and Liz Barnes, together with their marketing director and lifelong friend Roger Rourke, say they are on the verge of something big, with the red gum aged shiraz already attracting return buyers watching for the release of subsequent vintages.

For the past decade the trio has persevered in its research and development of an alternative to ageing wines in French oak barrels.

“We knew it was only a matter of getting it right,” Mr Barnes said.

“We had no doubts to persevere with it even when there were setbacks.

“We still had to make elegant wine, that is what the Beechworth region is all about.”



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Mr Barnes is the vigneron and his wife Liz is the winemaker at Star Lane.

They planted their first grapes at Wooragee in 1997 after moving from Deniliquin where Mr Barnes had been a broad-acre farmer and Mrs Barnes came from four generations involved in the timber industry.

They established a winery in 2005 and since then have forged a reputation for small estate grown premium red wines made using traditional French techniques, including handpicking fruit from low yielding vines, basket pressing and minimum intervention from vine to glass.

Their wines have earned Star Lane a five-star rating from renowned wine writer James Halliday in his 2015 Wine Companion.

“When we first started off we thought about red gum barrels but we wanted to nail that reputation first and have some knowledge and credibility before we did something left field,” Mr Barnes said.

Mr Rourke said over 10 years they had compared the maturation of the shiraz in the red gum and traditional oak barrels, eventually determining the former to be superior and requiring a shorter cellaring time to deliver a wine drinking at its optimum.

He said contrary to its reputation as a hardwood, the red gum had shown a breathability superior to the oak and the timber’s higher porosity allowed more oxygen to be drawn, in turn enhancing the intensity of the relationship between the wine and barrel.

Mrs Barnes said ageing in red gum barrels for 18 to 24 months gave the wine a distinct personality Star Lane has dubbed “the taste of Australia”.

Mr Rourke said as well as being a fermentation breakthrough, Star Lane’s success with red gum barrels had the potential to be a manufacturing and marketing first, having created interest in a product and technique that could be taken around the world to markets in China, Japan and Korea.

The 2012 Elements Shiraz isn’t cheap at \$400 a bottle but it is packaged in a handcrafted red gum box, wrapped in export grade merino wool, handwaxed and corked, signed by Mrs Barnes and individually numbered in a limited release of 300 bottles.

Mr Rourke said that made the wine perfect as a prestige item, sold for corporate gifts or special occasions.



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