

Emerging from the Southern New South Wales wine region are some of today's most promising producers. **Katrina Holden** reports on the wine creations, and characters, from our Capital.

The Southern New South Wales region consists of Canberra District, Hilltops, Gundagai and Tumbarumba. This region is increasingly being recognised as capable or producing some of our country's greatest wine assets.

The Canberra District spans both New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, and is home to more than 140 vineyards and more than 33 wineries. With an altitudinal range that spans from 300 to 800 metres and varying soil types, the cool-climate wine region offers a diversity of styles.

The region is currently building on its strong reputation for producing quality, cool-climate wines and a number of newer producers in recent years are helping to attract loyal followers, including Canberra drinkers themselves who, some say, have been slow to realise the quality of wines being produced in their backyard.

At the time of writing, Canberra District wineries were in the middle of their 2011 vintage, with everyone reporting problems with mildew.

Anne Caine, managing director Lerida Estate, former president of the Canberra District Wine Association and current vice president of NSW Wine Industry Association says that the region lost about 30-40 per cent of fruit. "A lot of small winemakers don't have the resources or staff to jump on top of disease as quickly as they should. We are a highly intensive boutique winery district," said Anne. The Canberra District celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, with Dr Edgar Reik planting the first vines in 1971 on the foreshore of Lake George.

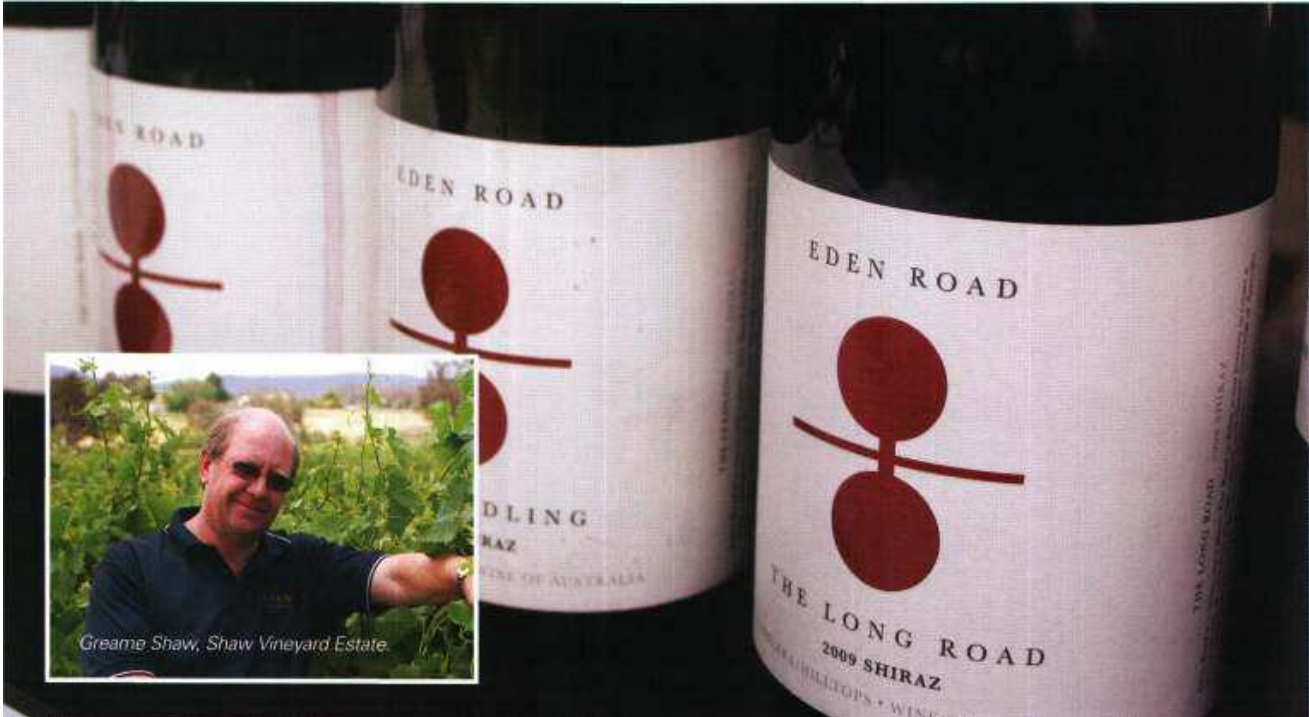
"Vintage is looking great at the moment with four nervous weeks to go," said Ken Helm, AM who was appointed a Member in the General Division in the Order of Australia in 2010 for his service to the Australian wine industry and commitment to riesling. "It has been a season like 1984, lots of rain, cool summer, some disease pressure. If the season continues to be cool and dry we will be looking at another great vintage and some great wines. But as always I will not relax until I have the grapes harvested."

Ken is widely considered one of our country's greatest winemakers and riesling advocate, with that particular grape variety flourishing in the Canberra District. The winery was established in 1973 in Murrumbateman and in addition to its riesling (now in its 35th vintage), Helm Wines is also revered for its cabernet.

"Riesling is misunderstood because you can produce seven different wine styles from the one grape – it's the only variety capable of this - so the public is confused by what they should expect from a riesling," said Ken. "They ask: is it sweet, dry, semi sweet, fruity? However, riesling has been the favoured white wine of winemakers, sommeliers, judges and the discerning consumer for many years. I don't want it to be trendy – trends come and go. I am pleased to see riesling in the last five years is starting to demand the prices which reflect its quality (\$30+ per bottle)." Helm Wines will release their next riesling in July 2011.

Clonakilla is widely regarded as one of the stalwarts of the region. In 1971, in the same year as Edgar Reik, Dr John Kirk planted cabernet and riesling





near Murrumbatemen, with shiraz to follow in 1972. In 1978, he was one of the first Australian winegrowers to plant viognier.

John's son Tim has taken Clonakilla to great new heights. The Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier enjoys an iconic status amongst Australian wines and has a string of medals and trophies to show for it, including being rated Exceptional in the Langton's Classification of Australian Wine, 2010.

"It has been fantastic to see how much of a buzz there is around Canberra wines over the last year or two," said Tim Kirk, chief winemaker and CEO, Clonakilla. "There are a number of producers here who are doing really well. Shiraz and riesling are the standout varieties, but some great work is being done with some of the alternative varieties as well: Ravensworth Sangiovese, Lark Hill Gruner Veltliner and Mount Majura Tempranillo have all received glowing reviews in recent months. The Kyeema Merlot too has received high praise. It is great to see people experimenting with new varieties. While that is going on there is a determination to press ahead with the idea that has gained widespread currency in the wine world: Canberra District Shiraz and riesling wines are among the best in the country."

Clonakilla will release their 2010 Hilltops Shiraz on 1 May, along with the 2010 Viognier, 2009 Ballinderry Cabernet Merlot and the rare, highly sought after 2009 Syrah. The 2010 Shiraz Viognier is released 1 September.

The popularity of Canberra cool-climate shiraz has been affirmed in the case of Alex McKay of Collector Wines. Alex, a former winemaker at Constellation's Canberra 'Kamberra' winery, was

awarded four trophies at the 2010 Macquarie Group Sydney Royal Wine Show, including the trophy for Best Red Wine of Show for his 2008 Collector Reserve Shiraz. The wine is made near 'Collector' using fruit sourced from several growers.

"Wine judges are preferring shiraz from cool climates because they have more elegance," said Anne Caine.

Alex and Collector went on to more recently win three gold at the 2011 Macquarie Sydney Royal Wine Show and also the trophy for the exhibitor of the best shiraz/viognier from classes 33 and 38 for their Marked Tree Red Shiraz 2009.

Relative newcomer, Eden Road Wines, is forging a path with their shiraz. Winemaker Nick Spencer is the current president of the Canberra District Wine Association. With no owned vineyards but fruit sourced from four different regions, the winery is literally located in Canberra.

"It's great because we're not locked in, but we do tend to stick with the same growers," said sales and marketing manager, Brysson Whyte.

Their first release was from the 2008 vintage with the 2008 Long Road Hilltops Shiraz, at just \$20 RRP, winning the coveted Jimmy Watson Memorial Trophy at the Royal Melbourne Wine Show over more than 890 entries. The Eden Road portfolio consists of three tiers – Eden Road (premium range); Long Road (main range); and The Seedling (introductory range).

"We are making wines true to the region and its styles. You can taste the soil from which they're grown," said Brysson.

As evidence of the increasing prominence of the region, Eden Road are beginning to "talk

up" the region more on their labels, with new packaging to feature the region more prominently on the bottle.

Another new player making some noise is Capital Wines, formed in 2008 when it brought the established Kyeema Vineyard from Constellation Wines. With fruit from Kyeema and also purchased fruit from a number of other growers, the wines include the Kyeema Vineyard Reserve, The Ministry range and the Blue Gum range. Jennie Mooney, managing director at Capital Wines, says the winery has been gaining a strong following for its merlot, with their 2008 Backbencher Merlot chosen by Huon Hooke to represent Australia in the most recent Tri Nations Wine Challenge and taking out the trophy for merlot.

"Merlot is a given from this region," said Jennie Mooney. "The problem with merlot is that from too warm a climate, it can be flabby with no structure. If too cool, it can be too green. In our Kyeema Vineyard, it's the highest-maintenance variety. All the work is in the vineyard with merlot – there's no other choice," said Jennie.

Capital are also starting to see some interest in their tempranillo.

"Our tempranillo is from young vines but in the past three years, there's been some fantastic media about this variety. It's a grape very suited to the region – it loves extremes of hot and cold," said Jennie.

Mount Majura, located on the eastern slopes of Mount Majura, just outside Canberra, has also seen the potential with tempranillo.

The single-vineyard operation was specifically chosen for its volcanic soils containing limestone.



"We want to express that limestone and perfect east-facing slope," said Fergus McGhie, sales and marketing manager of the 4000 case business.

"We are determined not to source fruit from other regions," said McGhie.

Their first vintage of tempranillo was in 2003, made by winemaker Frank van de Loo. "We're aiming for a full-bodied, juicy, firm and textural style. Frank is not shy of the tannin in this style," said Fergus.

The Mount Majura chardonnay is also expressive of its terroir, seeing no malolactic fermentation, with crunchy apple but still a creaminess from lees stirring, and a slight smokey character.

"We're looking for funkiness with our chardonnay and Burgundian characteristics," said Fergus, where winemaker Frank has worked several vintages.

Anne Caine of Lerida Estate says that pinot noir also does very well out of the region but tends to get left behind a lot of the noise that surrounds Canberra District's shiraz and riesling. There's a handful of pinot noir producers in the region and Lerida Estate's 'Josephine' Pinot Noir is among them and has been the most highly ranked pinot from Canberra District for 10 years.

When the group were pondering what name to give their flagship pinot noir, Anne, whose first name is in fact Josephine said:

"As the chief financial officer, I can tell you what you're going to call it – Josephine!"

Anne's husband Jim Lumbers eloquently describes the 2008 Lerida Estate Lake George Josephine Pinot Noir (RRP \$78) as, "mouthfilling – it coats the tongue and you can taste the flavour but it's light, not clinging, like a silken sheet with silky tannins, spicy fruit and hint of earthiness and forest floor. It needs a good 10 years to be showing its best."

Canberra character Graeme Shaw, of Shaw Vineyard Estate, admits he tries to have a "bit of fun" with the industry when he can. Among his latest releases is a wine called 'Flock Ewe' with a sheep on the label. The Laughter Series wine range from Shaw Vineyard Estate has been produced exclusively for Camp Quality as means of fundraising to assist children living with cancer. Their other wines include the classic Canberra favourites but also some surprises, including a Cielo Sparkling Semillon which is sold to Kirribilli House in Sydney and Government House in

Canberra; Shaw Vineyard Estate Riscato (a rose pink moscato style wine) and Shaw Vineyard Estate Vive (a sweet white).

The oversupply issues that have been plaguing the industry in recent times may be corrected during 2011, according to Graeme.

"2011 may be the year to bring things back to an even keel. A lot of people are debating 'can I stay in it, do I want to stay in it?' Some major supermarkets are chasing bulk wine and finding it hard at the moment. I think that's a very good thing and will help everyone create sustainability," said Graeme.

Certified biodynamic winery Lark Hill Winery this vintage has been able to benefit from the use of biodynamic practices.

As winemaker and director Chris Carpenter explains:

"It has been amazing and encouraging to see the effectiveness of a properly integrated biodynamic spray program, without systemic fungicides or pesticides, in a year where many conventionally farmed vineyards have been completely destroyed by disease. At Lark Hill, fruit quality looks fantastic yields are approximately 20 per cent higher than average."

The winery is firmly committed to biodynamic principles and has found now, with consumer awareness much higher than when they first started talking biodynamics in 2005, that customers are actively seeking their wines.

"With many restaurants now adopting sustainable produce focuses, wine lists are following suit with many sommeliers including a section for organic/biodynamic, or in fact insisting that all of their wines listed are organic or biodynamic," said Chris. "This is also showing up in more mainstream wine sales areas – with some major wine retailers now including organic and biodynamic sections of wine catalogues."

Lark Hill are also producers of Australia's first Gruner Veltliner – a grape variety traditionally grown alongside riesling in Austria. "We describe Gruner as riesling with texture and mouthfeel similar to viognier," says Chris. "It is an excellent retainer of acid (during ripening) and so achieves great length, minerality and focus despite higher ripeness levels. Gruner shows some fruit aromas of pear, black fig, melon and often a hint of herbaceousness. The palate should be rich and mouthfilling, however the texture (a touch of grip) and acid will draw this out into a long finish." The Gruner-Veltliner is strongly sought by wine bars, sommeliers and fine dining restaurants.



On a northeast slope of the Lake George range lies Lyn and David Crossley's Domaine Rogha Crois Estate (Gaelic for 'quality cross'), established in 1998. Their hand-tended vineyard produces quality pinot gris and pinot noir. The very cool 2011 season, which was accentuated for Rogha Crois at an altitude of 840m, resulted in a slow and extended ripening season, which, says David and Lyn, could see their best quality fruit since 2002.

Wines are crafted with minimum intervention to preserve their lifted, cool climate aromatics and also allow ripe fruit concentration and texture on the palate.

"It's a very fine balance, but the formula has produced some very exciting results for us and winning our wines recognition amongst the wine writing community."

The next wine release from Domaine Rogha Crois will be their 2011 pinot gris, available in October. "We have just bottled our 2010 Barrel Select Pinot Noir, our first 'reserve' wine which we are very excited with. It will be allowed to rest in bottle for at least 12 months before release," said the Crossley's.

From the Hilltops region, the rising star of the moment is Moppity Vineyards. Owners Jason and Alecia Brown purchased the 170 acre vineyard at the highest elevation in the Hilltops, with the "single purpose of putting Hilltops on the map."

Their first release was a 2006 Reserve Shiraz which won top gold at the London International Wine Challenge and since then, the medals have kept on coming.

"We received over 150 trophies and gold medals in 2010 and that has a lot of carriage with the trade," said Jason Brown.

At a time when many other wineries are facing incredible hardships, the growth of Moppity in just a few short years is remarkable. They went from a 1000 case business to a 30,000 case business in 12 months; in 2010 they had 50 stockists, by early 2011, they numbered 500. There are three ranges

of wine in the portfolio – the Reserve, the Estate and the Lock & Key (as well as the on-premise only wines, Argo).

"It's a crowded industry and it has faced its darkest hour. Yet we've experienced growth that is phenomenal in any time," said Jason.

Jason has a strong and unwavering belief in the Hilltops but is aware that further recognition will take time.

"There's a revolution taking place in cooler southern regions of NSW that's redefining cool climate regions that's really exciting for us. Most Hilltops fruit used to be sold off to bigger producers. What's happening now is that producers are looking at Hilltops and its track record and they are buying fruit not to blend, but to have a Hilltops wine," said Jason.

The 2011 vintage was on a "knife edge" for Moppity, with Jason reporting they had to drop the equivalent of 3000 cases of shiraz on the ground because it was not to the standard they need.

"It's important to us to follow on the good run we've had. People are keen to see what we'll come up with next," said Jason.

The future of the Canberra District appears set for real progression in the near future. Industry veteran Ken Helm predicts the region will grow in status as a premium wine producer and in hectares of vines, wine production and tourist facilities.

"Riesling and shiraz are the current premium performers, but cabernet sauvignon and other cool climate varieties will join them from specialist wineries," said Ken.

Lyn and David Crossley says that the recent downturn and removal of vines and subsequent consolidation of existing holdings means "the region is well placed to benefit as the industry recovers."