

GOURMET TRAVELLER

THE INDEPENDENT DRINKS JOURNAL

WINE

Chardonnay: Victoria's Best

New Zealand
Winemaker of
the Year 2018

TASTINGS

PINOT NOIR
RIESLING, ROSÉ + GRIS
YARRA VALLEY

FEB/MAR 2018 A\$9.95 NZ\$10.20

gourmettravellerwine.com

02

GRAMPIANS – ALENTEIO – CROATIA – CHEESE & WINE MATCHING

TEXT JANE FAULKNER

TIME TO SHINE

The Yarra Valley, although not without its struggles, seems to be able to produce just about any wine well. Here we talk to the producers about what makes it so special.

SCENE STEALER
De Bortoli Yarra
Valley Estate.





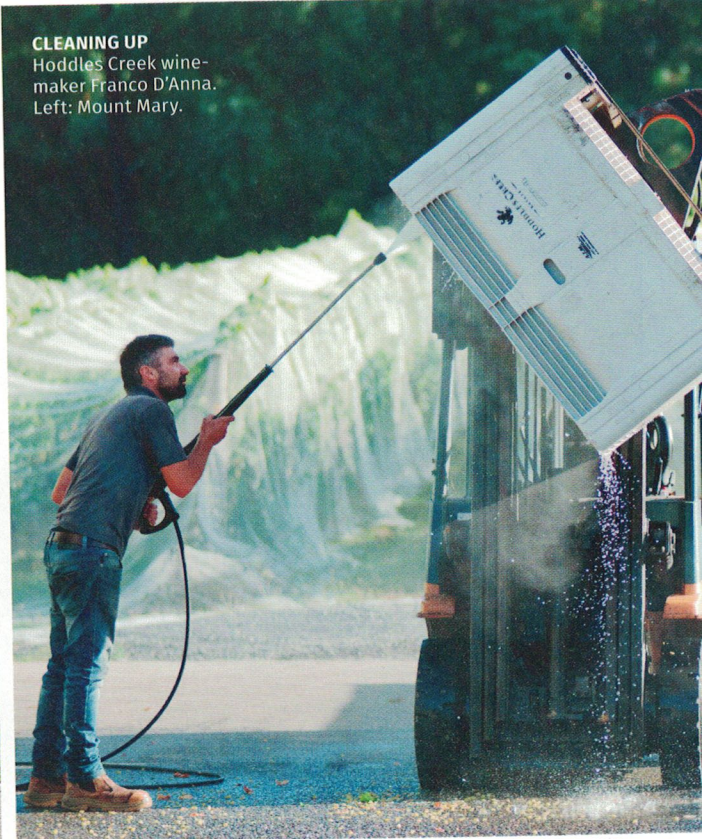
It doesn't take long for Melbourne's skyline to disappear, replaced by the bucolic landscape of the Yarra Valley to the city's east. This jewel of a wine region is just over an hour's drive away and the route leads directly to its gastronomic nucleus, the bustling town of Healesville.

When we arrive it's beer o'clock on Friday afternoon and while the Healesville Hotel is a great place for gossip, for an insight into the region's wine, head to the bottle shop. Mind you, it's not just any local bottle. For nearly 15 years, Barrique Wine Store has kept winemakers happy with choice imports "with the aim of bringing the world of wine to one of Australia's premium wine growing regions." A change of ownership a year ago put the spotlight back on local producers from the small and obscure to more recognisable names. Shelves are lined with Fickers Two Bricks Shiraz, Alkimi Marsanne, Bird On A Wire Nebbiolo, Dominic Valentine Valere Riesling, Thick As Thieves Arneis, Brachetto d'Soumah, Payten & Jones Solera No. 1 Leuconoe Sangiovese, Rob Dolan Barbera, Bobar Gamma Ray and the eclectic range goes on and on. But get this, all are made in the Yarra Valley with fruit grown there, too. It's a cool juxtaposition because the valley's reputation has been built on its exceptional cabernet sauvignon and latterly fragrant syrah, pinot noir in all its guises along with its soulmate, chardonnay. Stonkingly good, chardonnay. This large, but far from homogenous, region is being reshaped by distinction as much as quality.

Just a side note, the spread of phylloxera, the devastating insect that kills grape vines planted on their own roots, is another if compounding issue. That aside for a moment.

So, what makes the Yarra Valley attractive and alluring to winemakers? A burgeoning varietal mix and a range of styles,

CLEANING UP
Hoddles Creek wine-maker Franco D'Anna. Left: Mount Mary.



which is all thanks to the lay of the land. Simplistically, the region is split between the cool upper Yarra and the warmer lower valley floor but there are many permutations from unclassified subregions to individual vineyards.

One of the coolest and the southern-most sites, Gembrook Hill, produces beautiful wines, including ethereal pinot noir off its amphitheatre-shaped vineyard. Winemaker Andrew Marks says the strengths of the Yarra depend on who you are talking to and where they are based. "Mount Mary would have a case to put forward for making some of the world's best cabernet, Wantirna Estate, too, whereas Yarra Yering would say it's making wonderful shiraz and other Rhône wines, at Gembrook we like our sauvignon blanc and Oakridge and Seville Estate would say they make great pinot noir and chardonnay. Then there are innovators like Luke Lambert and Denton, and what they do with nebbiolo."

"You can't generalise about the Yarra because there's such diversity, but proof is in the wines and they are very compelling," he explains. "There are a lot of small producers who are focused on their craft. And like us, grow the grapes, make the wine and it counts for plenty." However, he also appreciates growers as Marks sources fruit for his own label The Wanderer.

It's worth remembering the Yarra Valley is actually Victoria's first wine region with vines originally planted in 1838, at the site of Yering Station. Then 25 years later, St Huberts vineyard was established while Swiss migrant, Guillaume de Pury created Yeringberg, which soon earned an international reputation. He, with son George, won a swag of medals for their "dry table wines...famous for lightness and quality". Sadly, falling sales in difficult economic times, plus the impact of the fortified wine industry meant that by 1921, Yeringberg ceased making wine, the last in the valley to do so. No vines survived. Fortunately, the family remained on the same land as graziers.

Despite the hiatus, the rebirth began in 1963 led by Wantirna Estate, followed by Yarra Yering and in the early 70s Mount Mary and Seville Estate began along with others. For Yeringberg, the spark was rekindled in 1969. Its historic 19th century winery,



REASON TO SMILE
De Bortoli's Yarra Valley Estate wine-maker Sarah Fagan.

now classified by the National Trust, came back to life and today fourth generation winemaker Sandra de Pury crafts wines still defined as having lightness and quality. That those trailblazers are now legends, still producing wonderful wine, is a testament to their fortitude and adaptability.

While reds dominate with 66 per cent of plantings, the Yarra has 2,150 hectares under vine and has morphed into Australia's most diverse and dynamic cooler climate region in a relatively short time. How? Let's start with chardonnay.

The region catapulted chardonnay back into the limelight a decade or so ago by reshaping it into a new, modern style. And led the chardonnay renaissance, which caught on Australia-wide. It was thanks, in part, to producers such as Steve Webber from De Bortoli and especially David Bicknell at Oakridge, the 2017 *GT WINE* Winemaker of the Year, and Steve Flamsteed from Giant Steps, the previous winner of the same accolade.

All have been chasing a more refined, tighter style with complex sulphides adding lip-smacking flinty, smoky and savoury nuances matched to quality of fruit. The fruit is picked earlier to retain natural acidity. They back off lees-stirring and the amount of new French oak barrels, while favouring larger format especially puncheons. It's not a recipe. It's a stylistic adjustment coupled with the significant change of sourcing fruit from cool vineyards such as Funder & Diamond in Wandin East and Willowlake in Gladysdale, both make the grade for Oakridge's top single-site chardonnays.

"It might sound like a cliché to use the word elegance, but it's true with Yarra chardonnay more than any other region," says Flamsteed. "These wines dance along your palate and they leave this residual energy; a textural feel you get from good producers in the region. And now it is about highlighting the vineyard, as with all great wine. Giant Steps' focus is solely on the Yarra and what makes the region appealing for us is pinot noir, chardonnay and syrah and single-vineyard expressions from those varieties."

Flamsteed is particularly excited about a 'new' style coming out of the valley – the light, dry reds, lots of carbonic maceration

Places to Stay

Brooklands Apartments East and West

stayz.com.au

Enjoy bucolic views as well as a great location. These two modern apartments are situated in the heart of Healesville, a short walk to the main wine and dine strip. Each offers a touch of flair and comfort in equal measure, which includes a steam shower and interior styling straight out of a lifestyle magazine.

Chateau Yering Hotel

(03) 9237 3333, chateauyering.com.au

A historic, grand property that's a rural idyll reminiscent of a by-gone era and hence appropriately decorated given its heritage listing. Chateau Yering has two dining options: the awarded Eleonore's restaurant, which serves high-tea; and the casual Sweetwater café.

Balgownie Estate

(03) 9730 0700, balgownieestate.com.au

Fancy a day spa with pampering treatments? Or a wine tasting at the cellar door followed by lunch? Balgownie Estate offers all that and more with plenty of accommodation options, including weekend packages.

Healesville Hotel

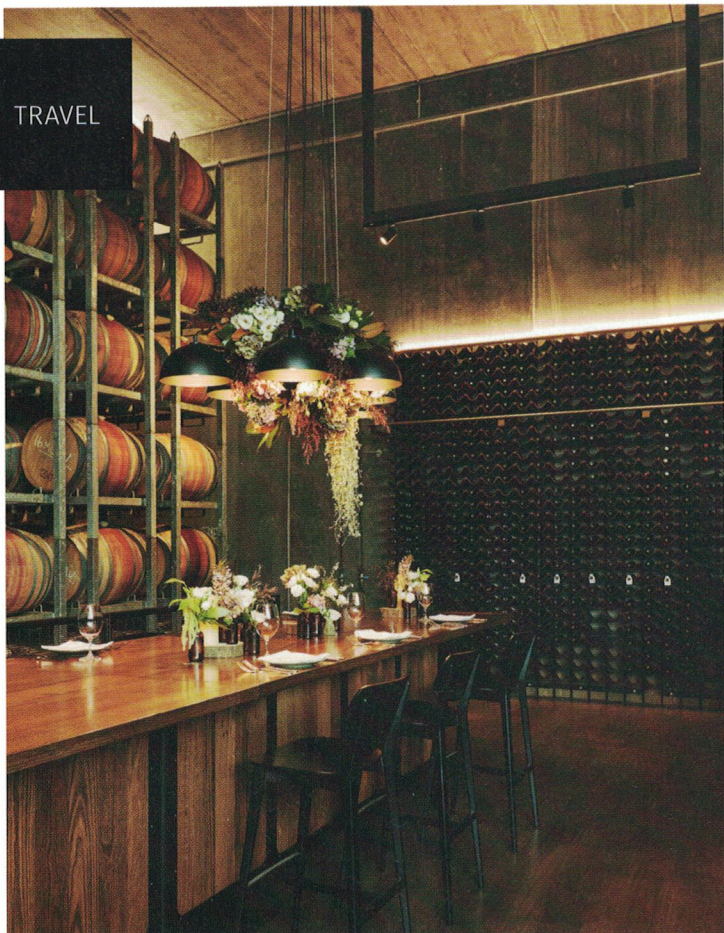
(03) 5962 4002, yarravalleyharvest.com.au

This popular hotel offers a central location, unpretentious, spacious rooms with comfortable beds, but the rub is shared bathrooms – it is a country pub after all. Yet downstairs, there's a terrific restaurant and wine list to match.

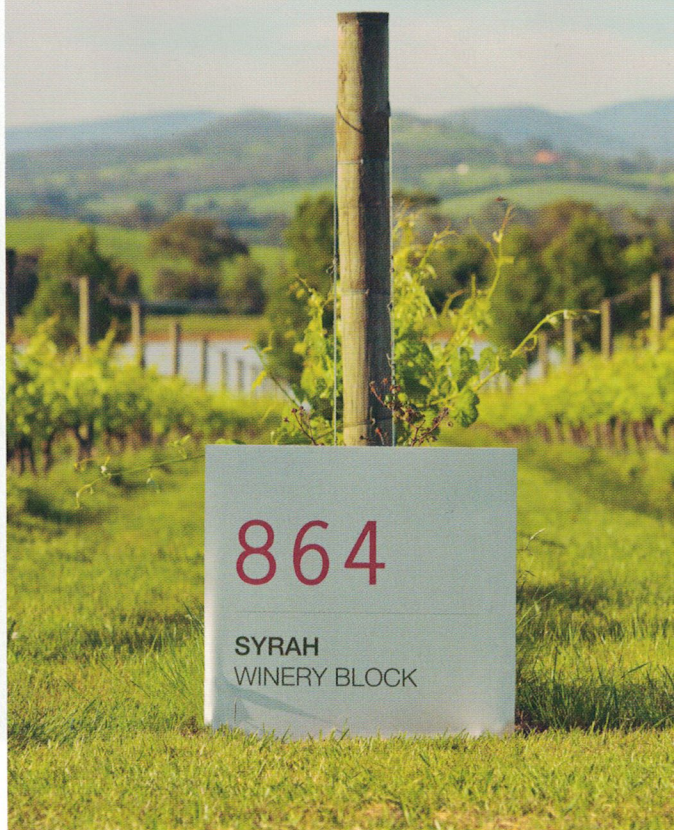
Furmston House

(03) 5962 4002, yarravalleyharvest.com.au

From the folk behind the Healesville Hotel, Furmston House is conveniently situated behind the pub. This is a stylish home-away-from-home with contemporary furnishings and amenities with room for up to three couples, each with an ensuite and a king bed.



IT'S A SIGN
Oakridge. Left: private dining at Giant Steps.



Places to Eat

Habituel Bakery & Coffee Roasters (03) 5957 3230, habituel.com.au

This is where locals come for the best handmade bread, pastries and coffee, including freshly roasted coffee beans to take home.

Oakridge (03) 9738 9900, oakridgewines.com.au

Oakridge restaurant is arguably the number one dining option around. Aside from dazzling wines crafted by Dave Bicknell, chefs Matt Stone and Jo Barrett execute inventive, exquisite food utilising produce from their expansive kitchen garden.

The Independent Restaurant & Bar (03) 5968 1110, theindependentgembrook.com.au

Spanish flavours abound with a few dishes from other Mediterranean shores, such as Italy with ricotta gnocchi and superb suckling pig on the menu. It's an airy, large dining space with a wine bar to one side.

Giant Steps (03) 5962 6111, giantstepswine.com.au

A new cool fit-out means Giant Steps has morphed into a stylish dining space with Jarrod Hudson on the pans. Think crab and avocado salad with Thai flavours and wood-fired pizza, plus a killer wine list.

Ezard at Levantine Hill (03) 5962 1333, levantinehill.com.au

Levantine Hill's cellar door/restaurant was designed by feted architect Karl Fender. But it's not all about looks. Chef Teage Ezard is the talent behind the restaurant and he's crafted an impressive menu.

TarraWarra Estate (03) 5957 3510, tarrawarra.com.au

A beautiful property and the food is fresh and delicious with ingredients sourced from the estate's garden and locally.

Trattoria d'Soumah (03) 5962 4716, soumah.com.au

The food is rustic and fun with simple, yet choice Northern Italian fare and excellent wood-fire pizza. Soumah's wines feature from the Italian-inspired to single-vineyard offerings. Just kick-back and relax.

Locale Restaurant at De Bortoli (03) 5965 2271, debortoli.com.au

The De Bortoli family's Italian heritage means Locale encourages sharing antipasto before classic pasta dishes and more substantial offerings. The cellar door has a cheese shop with a maturing room.


resulting in fresh and juicy, smashable drops. Giant Steps has just released its first LDR (Light Dry Red) 2017 roughly a 50/50 mix of pinot noir and syrah. The blend was spearheaded by Sarah Crowe at Yarra Yering then Simon Steele at Medhurst. These styles are being embraced by the likes of Tim Shand from Punt Road using gamay and Bicknell with pinot meunier whereas De Bortoli blend syrah and gamay to great effect. Some will question the not-so-smashable pricing though – hovering around the \$30-plus to Yarra Yering's Light Dry Red at \$92.

De Bortoli winemaker Sarah Fagan explains how the blend, under the label La Bohème and priced at \$20, is “a bright, fragrant and crunchy style thanks to the gamay whereas the syrah offers more fragrance. It's about time these lighter wines and blends came back into fashion.”

While she's loving these fresh wines, Fagan adds that the strength of the Yarra Valley is having “the classic, iconic producers sitting alongside the new-wave, those who are doing kooky things and interesting stuff, those who are challenging people's perceptions about what the valley is about. For us it's pinot blanc (they got cuttings from Hoddles Creek Estate). I think it's a really interesting drink and we're playing around with the variety to see what it can do, and making two different styles. One lean and crisp, the other chalkier and rounder.”

Back to the pesky pest. Phylloxera hit the Yarra in 2006 and while measures were put in place to destroy the infected sites and thwart the insect's destructive spread, they didn't work. Some 34 vineyards have phylloxera and it's estimated that in a few years, up to three-quarters of the region's vineyards could be infested. The only solution is replant vines with resistant rootstock.

For many reasons including cost, some sites won't be revived, but it doesn't sound the death knell for the valley, far from it. Instead it's a chance to weed out lesser performing sites, plant more suitable varieties taking into consideration row orientation



**You can't
generalise
about the Yarra
because there's
such diversity,
but proof is in
the wines.**

and planting density. "This is an opportunity for people to reassess their sites and do everything properly," says Tom Carson, whose family vineyard is at Yarra Glen. "It's time to work out the cool spots for early ripening varieties and think about planting later ripening varieties in warm spots. It is a tragedy to be pulling out 20-, 30- or 40-year-old vineyards, but it is a reality. Now is the time to re-evaluate everything in the vineyard. Do we need to change our trellising? Do we need to move to close plantings? There's been much innovation in winemaking, now it's time to innovate in viticulture."

Tom and Nadege Carson's high-density three-hectare vineyard Serrat is located in the Maroondah phylloxera-infested zone and about half of their vines are on rootstocks. They expect to have all converted within a few years. Just as important is what they're growing. It's no secret they're pinot noir and chardonnay aficionados, but they also grow viognier, malbec, barbera, nebbiolo, syrah, grenache and recently grenache blanc. In other words, varieties better suited to their site.

It would have been unthinkable 25 years ago, when Carson took up winemaking in the Yarra, to plant grenache and nebbiolo; it's too cool for these late-ripening varieties. "I'm a massive fan of Yarra nebbiolo and I think the potential for the variety here is huge," he now says. I would have never expected to hear him talk about grenache, nebbiolo and the Yarra in the same breath.

Winemaker, viticulturist and president of the Yarra Valley Wine Growers Association Franco d'Anna says the most decisive change in the last 10 years or so has been on quality and it does relate to the right varieties matched to the right sites. For his patch, the cool climate Hoddles Creek Estate it's about the pinot trifecta of noir, blanc and gris, plus chardonnay.

D'Anna has made mistakes, costly ones, resulting in vines being grubbed including cabernet sauvignon (too cold at his site), sauvignon blanc (his heart wasn't in it) and replanting onto rootstock (a necessity) or waiting eight years for a variety to reveal

itself properly (his pinot blanc), and yet he wouldn't change a thing. "My mistakes have given me great insight into my vineyards and helped me make the right decisions in the end," he says. "Always, always the vineyard is key. It's what you do with it that counts. You have to listen to it."

It might not seem radical, but by Yarra standards making a skin-contact pinot gris in 2013 seemed out there. D'Anna left the juice on skins for a week. It turned out darker than rosé. A fellow winemaker told him he was mad. "Before the 2013, my pinot gris was just a wine," he says. "Now I love making it and drinking it because it's a wine with personality. It has an identity."

Another wine with personality is 2015 Denton Yellow, a serendipitous wine. "We didn't set out to make a yellow wine (as in an oxidative vin jaune style famous in France's Jura region)," says Simon Denton, "it happened by accident. Then we thought let's go with it and see what happens."

He's laughing telling the story how a missing (forgotten?) barrel was discovered and Luke Lambert, his winemaker, said 'I've found a barrel out the back and it's doing something interesting'.

It could have gone either way – vinegar or wine. Thankfully the flor (a yeast covering the wine) had been protecting the wine in barrel. "We didn't know what to expect, it had the flor character and beautiful freshness. It's the sort of wine we like to drink. I'm not going to drink it always but I'll match it to cheese and definitely have it as an aperitif."

Melbourne-based, Denton is one of Australia's most lauded restaurateurs with an interest in Japanese flavours – he co-owns



UNDER COVER
Nets protecting vines
at Hoddles Creek.

Hihou, Kappa and Izakaya Den – and he gets umami flavours, a feature of oxidative wine. “Luke says there’s always a certain amount of luck in anything. It’s how you ride your luck and your decisions along the way that make the difference. That wine could have gone bad, but it worked out perfectly and we have another barrel (to be released in four years),” says Denton.

Luke Lambert is one of the most self-deprecating and talented winemakers around. His love of the valley had been sparked by the lighter-framed reds of Yeringberg, Yarra Yering and Mount Mary and inspired him to pursue a life of wine. “When I was getting into wine in the late 90s, those three (producers) were making the classic, high-acid, medium-weight wines when people were drinking super-charged Barossa wines, which I didn’t enjoy. They didn’t speak to me and I felt I was in the minority at uni because everyone was looking for power and concentration and I wasn’t. The Yarra wines made perfect sense to me.”

“There’s a clarity, a purity with the acidity and not fruit sweetness and the wines are seldom viscous and certainly not heavy or syrupy,” Lambert says. “The Yarra can’t do supercharged.”

Subsequent vintages in Italy’s Piedmont region meant Lambert fell for nebbiolo. Denton grows nebbiolo with Lambert making its rendition as well as his own label’s version.

Yarra Valley nebbiolo is in a watch-this-space zone and if anyone will excel at it, it’s Lambert. And he’s just realised a dream: buying land on the edge of the valley with no vines other than invasive blackberries and bush. But he believes it’s a site perfect for nebbiolo. “I’ve been working towards this for 20 years,” he says. “I’ll be doing one wine as that place is about one wine: nebbiolo. It’s going to take 15 years, so I’ll have to be patient.”

Someone who is resigned to buying grapes because she owns no vineyards is Kate Goodman. She’s a hugely experienced winemaker, who prefers to “source fruit from different places rather

than the holy grail of a single site.” In 2012, Goodman set up her eponymous label offering Yarra pinot noir and chardonnay then in 2013 added her other love, cabernet sauvignon. No other Australian wine region can excel in all three.

Part of cabernet’s allure is that it can age gracefully. “I love its fragrance and power. It has strength, but doesn’t have to be tough, especially Yarra cabernet, which can be light- to medium-bodied and still be age-worthy with fine-grained tannins, such as Yeringberg – there’s so much personality in those wines.”

“For someone who loves cabernet, I can make it buying fruit from the heartland of a warmer lower Yarra site while still pursuing chardonnay in upper cooler vineyards. The upside of not owning vineyards is I can source grapes for the wines I want to make,” she explains.

Of course, Goodman is concerned with the ever-increasing price: Yarra Valley fruit is at a premium. The shortfalls that will happen as a result of extensive replanting due to phylloxera, because it’s going to take years to recover, drive up the prices and constant pressure from the buying power of bigger producers can squeeze out small players. Still she adds: “I have great relationships with my growers and I don’t chop and change. I buy the fruit in good and bad years and I pay them well for their grapes. I’m not circling and looking for the cheapest price as I’m committed for the long-term.”

To have personalities like Goodman, Lambert, Dave Chatfield from Out of Step Wines, and the array of other vibrant small operators sourcing grapes, to those with their own vineyards, such as Yarra Yering and Gembrook Hill, to larger businesses doing both, means the wines appeal on a qualitative level. “That’s the beauty of the place. No matter what wine you’re making, be true to that,” says Denton. “We’re not trying to compete with other regions. We want to do what the Yarra Valley does well and that is make elegant wines. Long may that trend continue.” 🍷

FACES OF THE REGION
 Yarra Yering's Sarah Crowe (right). Below: Steve Flamsteed and Tony Fickers of Giant Steps tasting ferments.

Top Ten Yarra Valley Wines

2016 Hoddles Creek Estate Road Block Chardonnay, A\$60

A new wine for Franco D'Anna and a stunning debut. It's all about texture with a hint of white stone fruit and citrus, creamed honey and leesy notes. Fuller bodied, but it has that tell-tale line of natural acidity and detail from the vineyard. Flinty, quite tangy, pure and astonishingly complex given its youth and vine age. 95 points

2015 De Bortoli Section A8 Syrah, A\$55

The vineyard was planted in 1971 and a select parcel goes into this A8. An insane colour – dark purple/garnet – and laden with pepper, spice and florals. The palate is medium-bodied savoury with dark red berries. Finely detailed with compact textural tannins – very fresh and long on the finish. 96 points

2017 Giant Step LDR Pinot Noir Syrah, A\$35

A new wine for Giant Steps. It's crisp, refreshing, juicy and supple. And it rocks. LDR stands for Light Dry Red and is full of fragrant red fruits, spice and it's cheery as anything. A lighter frame with a neat acid line and sweet tannins. It is really gluggable. 93 points

2015 Goodman Chardonnay, A\$40

Kate Goodman sources fruit from the expansive, by Yarra standards, Willowlake Vineyard as many do. A beautifully moderated wine with a sprinkling of powdered ginger, white stone fruit, and lemon zest with a floral lift and some oak spice. Tight and tangy with a balanced and persistent finish. 95 points

2015 Marli Russell by Mount Mary Marsanne Roussanne, A\$55

When this wine was in the conceptual stage, I tasted the individual components and thought, "Wow". Now as one, I still say, "Wow". Hints of honeysuckle, ginger flower and spice, it's all about texture though, creamy, luscious, round and smooth, but not heavy. The phenolics are bound in with the feel of this and the acidity keeps it fresh. 95 points

2015 Denton Yellow, A\$48/500ml

It comes in a long 500ml bottle, but don't be fooled: it's not sweet. It's chardonnay, but not as you know it. An oxidative style, protected by a layer of flor, and called Yellow in recognition of Jura's famed vin jaune. This is a beauty. It's full of salty, lemony goodness; umami through and through. It is really tangy with a twist of lemon and a very dry finish. 95 points

2017 Out of Step Willowlake Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc, A\$28

Out of Step make cracking sauvignon blanc, three of them, and the Willowlake Vineyard is a favourite. It has some skin contact adding to the texture and savoury layers. Laced with lemon barley water and zesty acidity with a crunchy daikon feel to it. It is tightly wound given its youth and will unfurl in time. 95 points

2015 Gembrook Hill Pinot Noir, A\$55

Gembrook Hill always produces divine, heady pinot noir – all perfume and restraint. This starts with a mix of charcuterie and savoury notes then some wild strawberry and cherries. It's medium-bodied with silky tannins, long and pure on the finish. This is something special. 96 points

2015 Luke Lambert Nebbiolo, A\$60

Nebbiolo specialist Luke Lambert is never truly satisfied with his



renditions of this great red. He should be chuffed with the 2015 – his most detailed and finest to date. There is no mistaking the variety with its perfume – all florals, woody spices, dried herbs – with crisp acidity and powdery tannins. There's depth and structure, yet the end result is a lithe wine. 95 points

2015 Yarra Yering Dry Red Wine No 2, A\$100

Sarah Crowe has transformed the Yarra Yering wines starting with less new oak and reducing the amount of time the wine is left in it. She's allowing the fruit to shine and it does in this No 2. Gorgeous aromatics, wafts of red plums, spice, florals and rose petals. The medium-bodied palate is flush with succulent fruit, super fine, velvety tannins and a brightness never seen before in this wine. Wow. What a drink. 96 points