

REMEMBERING TARAS

THE ENIGMATIC GENIUS BEHIND OCHOTA BARRELS



TARAS OCHOTA stood at the kitchen sink in his Adelaide Hills home and winery over looking the Basket Range. It was an idyllic Australian day. He had received a call from an intermediary to the tour manager for the Rolling Stones who were in Australia to play the country's headline music festival, The Big Day Out. Apparently some of the road crew wanted to come and try the wines and see the winery. *No big deal*, he thought.



A big black SUV pulled around the corner and rolled up the dirt track towards the house. *Here they are* he thought to himself. Another SUV rolled around the corner. Then another. Then another. As they pulled up and disembarked, a sunglasses-clad Mick Jagger emerged from one, Richards and the rest of the band from the others. *What the fack?!* Taras' wife Amber screamed from somewhere else in the house, obviously enjoying the same vista.

Taras had already become a pretty big deal after making a wine with Maynard Keenan, the enigmatic lead singer of metal band Tool and one of the biggest private collectors of fine Australian Wine in the world. The wine they made called a 'Sense of Compression' had earned rave reviews for its maverick wine making. Like all of his wines, the label art was cutting edge, clean and incredibly striking.

Taras took them on the standard tour of the winery and shared with them all of his insights and winemaking philosophies. They tasted the wines while Amber hurriedly prepared more food to add to the already significant spread for their extra, unexpected guests. Recalling them all as being incredibly down to earth and friendly, Mick and the rest politely thanked Amber for their hospitality (Mick fancied Amber apparently) and enthusiastically pressed the Mom and Pop winemaking team on their stories and their wine. After lunch, beers were cracked in abundance and Mick got up and regaled them all on a 'shitty, busted piano in our living room'. There was dancing, singing and good times.

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Mick went outside after the singsong to lie in the long grass just outside the house and enjoy the serenity. Sage, their toddler son ventured out and started crawling on him before leading him over to the sandpit to play tractors, Mick obliging for quite some time. Amber and Taras stood at the kitchen sink watching, dumbfounded - certainly one of the more interesting Tuesdays the Ochota Barrels winery had enjoyed in some time. The guests bought every bottle in the winery, with Mick demanding that he get every single bottle of Amber's micro-plot and foot treaded 'Home' Pinot Noir.

Fuck sake Taras, our allocation is getting small enough and now we have to compete with the Rolling Stones? I said incredulously to him as he recounted the story.

Taras Ochota was born to Ukrainian immigrants in South Australia in 1971. In the 70's and 80's, the family grew grapes and made wine in the most basic of ways. There were no pesticides used in the growing of grapes, no sulfur added and the resulting wines were glugged at dinner out of old vegemite jars by the whole family. Incredibly ahead of its time, this low-fi approach to winemaking would be another quarter century before it came to the fore in the minds of consumers.

In university Taras studied Hospitality management, but it was only to support or allow him to indulge his true passion: music. He was a bass player and had formed a band called Kraktus. In order to supplement his lifestyle as a gigging musician he plied his family-learnt expertise in various vineyards. 'Kranktus' played The Big Day Out and were on the verge of becoming the next big thing, until they didn't as he recalls. Instead Taras studied oenology, became a qualified wine maker and hit the road, heading to California to play in bands and work in wineries. After a stint in the innovative Two Hands winery. They hit the road again.

I'VE WORKED AROUND THE WORLD, WORKED FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND BEEN SHOWN DIFFERENT THINGS AND I'VE PICKED THE EYES OUT OF THOSE TECHNIQUES. I SUPPOSE I LIKE WINES THAT ARE A BIT MORE ELEGANT AND UNDER-EXTRACTED AND PRETTY, SO I'VE FOCUSED ON THAT.

Taras became a contract wine maker utilising a range of grapes and varieties. During a surfing trip to Mexico, they dreamed up Ochota Barrels. Ultra-small production. Hand made. Grenache. Nobody gives a shit about Grenache, let's start with a Grenache they said.





The striking branding was dreamed up by the couple themselves over Lucano and Calvados. The logo design is to infer a labyrinth of flavour, texture and emotion. Ochota is obviously the couples surname and it means hunt or desire (depending on who you ask). Barrels invokes the low-fi feel and approach of the whole operation and of course it is also the zenith of the surfing experience (dude). The wines were all to be named after punk bands, albums or lyrics. Fugazi, their first Grenache is named after Taras' favourite unknown punk outfit. Texture Like Sun, a song by the Stranglers that the couple shared as their stand out memory from their wedding set and Weird Berries in the Woods, a fragment of a sentence in an obscure Dead Kennedys song.

All of the wines (apart from Weird Berries Gewurtztraminer) come in clear glass Burgundy bottles. You can see the juice up close and personal, and it's Burgundy bottles signals complexity and guile.

NO MORE JUNK FOOD, ONLY GOOD, I EAT WEIRD BERRIES IN THE WOOD

All of this punk sensibility and hipster coolness fades into the background when it comes to the wines themselves. A so called natural approach was always the plan for Taras as it was how he approached everything - why change this for wine? His family wine making experience was always natural too. During his many jobs he had been a sponge to experience. Unlike so many winemakers, making a natural wine was not the mission statement, just part of the mission to try and capture the characteristics of the grape, the terroir of the vineyard and the conditions of the vintage. It was something else though, that made his new wines utterly unique.

MY IDEA IS TO EMBRACE NATURAL ACIDITY, WHICH IS BASICALLY FROM PICKING EARLY. WITH THAT YOU GET LOWER ALCOHOL THAN YOUR TYPICAL AUSTRALIAN WINES. WINES THAT HAVE ENERGY. TAKING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO MAKING WINES THAT HAVE AN ENERGY, THAT HAVE A VIBRANCY. WINES THAT 'POP' WHEN YOU PUT 'EM IN YOUR MOUTH!

I heard Taras describe his wines once as being all elbows and knees. Unlike most Australian producers, PARTICULARLY in 2008 when he was starting out, he is not trying to extract as much out of the grape as possible in terms of alcohol, body and heavy flavour. The focus is all on tension and natural acidity. The resulting wines are singularly unique and they certainly 'pop' in your mouth. This approach of picking early leads to a more savoury wine, and the zesty, prickly acidity completely set them apart initially, though more have started to follow his lead. Starting out with just a plot of Grenache, they began buying in organic fruit from selected vineyards and the Ochota Barrels range was born. This gives the operation a huge amount of freedom.



While their **Fugazi** Grenache and **I am the Owl** Syrah will be staples of the operation given they come off their own vineyard holdings, other varieties and ranges come and go. Amber and Taras both make competing Pinots.



There is mad scientist shit too. **Basket of Botanicals** is a wine where he will pick a big of every plot that they have no matter what the ilk or colour, as long as it is at his mandated ripeness. He dumps everything into a continuous ferment concrete egg to get going. He then goes foraging and picks some more. Elderflower, Sage, Juniper, river mint, wormwood. He makes a bouquet garni with all of his foraged ingredients and dumps it in. I can still remember the first time I tried it: think Cocchi Barolo Chinato, meets gin and tonic, meets multi variety red with the Ochota Barrels thunderbolt of electricity. Or as Taras puts it more legibly: it's pretty fucked up.

Before long Ochota Barrels were accumulating serious scores in the national wine media. James Halliday, the leading Australian voice on all things wine gave the 2012 I am the Owl Shiraz 97 points - only Australia's flagship wines Henschke Mount Edelstone and Pinfolds Grange scored higher. OB started to sell out it's range upon release. The collaboration with Tool and the Rolling Stones added further fuel to the fire.

Through all this Taras kept his feet on the ground and completely devoid of any ego, he self deprecatingly charmed everyone he met. He called his approach lazy wine making. Picking earlier to 'get on the piss earlier'. Using whole bunch because the destemmer was 'too much work to clean'. Upon trying his new releases once he asked me which Pinot I preferred, his or Ambers. I said Ambers and began what I hoped was going to be impressive reasoning before he pulled his face right up to mine and hissed through a broad smile: you little Irish cant! He then proceeded to explain how and why Amber was a much better wine maker than he.



I used to tease my colleagues in Australia about the deference and hysteria with which they greeted various Riesling and Burgundian producers, yet I got starry eyed when Taras was around, he was head meltingly cool. He was also an incredibly gentle and kind soul though, and he had time for everyone. Everybody who encountered him adored him and he enriched the Aussie wine scene not just with his magnificent creations but with his sense of fun, charm and approachability and generosity. His favourite pass times were spending time with his family, growing tomatoes, playing punk sets for all the cats in the winery as well as huge extraction of piss. There simply won't be another Taras Ochota. We will all miss you.



MUSIC - TO LISTEN TO TARAS OCHOTA'S ALBUM 'HECKLER WITH HIS BAND KRANKTUS CLICK [HERE](#)

FOR A SPOTIFY PLAYLIST OF SOME OF THE BANDS SONGS AND ALBUMS THAT ADORN THE LABELS OF THE OCHOTA BARRELS WINES CLICK [HERE](#)

TEXTURE LIKE SUN 'SECTOR RED' FIELD BLEND

VARITIES: PINOT NOIR, GRENACHE, GAMAY, MOUVEDRE,
PINOT MEUNIER, GEWURTZTRAMINER, FRAGOLA,
RIESLING & CHARDONNAY



The label may be completely illegible with its utterly lurid and almost painful yellow label. “That’s the idea”, says Taras Ochota. “It’s something in a clear bottle, nothing to hide, yummy”. It’s 50% destemmed and 50% whole berry (with a lot of solids) Pinot Noir, Grenache, Gamay, Mourvedre, Pinot Meunier, Gewurtztraminer, Fragola, Riesling & Chardonnay. This wine is all about carefully blending the nine varieties to achieve a wine that is basically and simply...delicious! The varieties are partially co-fermented and some lots kept separate before being basket pressed to stainless steel where it rests for a few months. ‘Texture like sun’ are words extracted from the song ‘Golden Brown’ by The Stranglers. “We had it play at our wedding”, **TARAS OCHOTA**

Red forest fruits, spice, white pepper and peat float around an undercurrent of roasted meats. The palate is lusciously red and supple then gives way to finely shaped tannins that are swept up by a wash of damson, cigar box, and cassis. Long, fleshy and so very drinkable. **92 POINTS, JAMES SUCKLING**

THE GREEN ROOM

VARIETIES: GRENACHE & SYRAH



Lifted spice, Satsuma plum compote and an herbal thread of thyme with white pepper entwine the strikingly fragrant bouquet of bouillon. The palate is opulent yet nervy with medium-bodied savory, finely-grained textural components resembling pomegranate and lingonberry. **TARAS OCHOTA**

Elegant and crisp, set on a transparent frame, with an appealing freshness to the wild strawberry, cranberry and pomegranate flavours. Details of white pepper, matcha green tea and sage linger on the vibrant finish. **Drink now. 90 POINTS, WINE SPECTATOR**

Such spice and rosy perfume, almost like a red fruit punch in flavour, with fresh herb and strawberry juice, cranberry freshness, light sappy and stalky tannin, but perfume, spice and drinkability, is the import. Has length too, with frisky tannin cleaning up the aftertaste. Can take a chill. Great wine for picnics and the like. **93 POINTS, THE WINE FRONT**

Superbly fragrant, pretty, playful and alluring. This has watermelon, strawberry and wild cherry from top to toe. There's a wealth of fine-grained tannins. Smoothly rendered with terrific energy. **Drink now. 92 POINTS, JAMES SUCKLING**

I AM THE OWL

VARITIES: SYRAH



Adelaide Hills vineyard, 100% whole bunch, no additions at all, old oak and made in 'the shed at home'. The grapes underwent a two day cold soak before fermentation took off on its own. Gentle hand plunging throughout the ferment allowed for more delicate flavors to remain despite sitting on skins for 88 days! A gentle basket pressing straight to used barrels and seven months later you have 'I am the Owl!' "A complex, spicy and finely textured Syrah that has a peppery sheen across blackberry and red plum fruit aromas, there's a dark stony edge too, really vibrant. The palate is wrapped in soft, supple tannin, plenty of crunchy black and red fruit flavor, drink young whilst on the fruit emphasis. **TARAS OCHOTA**

Fragrant and effusive, this supple red features white pepper and violet notes leaping out of the glass. Wild strawberry, cherry and sage flavors are fresh and vibrant, with terrific acidity that accentuates the complexity and verve. Drink now through 2028. 200 cases made. **93 POINTS, WINE SPECTATOR**

THE FUGAZI

VARITIES: GRENACHE



Taras and Amber Ochota make this from 68-year-old vines growing on a rise in Blewitt Springs. It's not what you might expect from McLaren grenache, though it is what you might expect from the winery: dynamic, crazy-delicious wine. They ferment it with 80 percent whole clusters, starting with seven days of cold maceration, then allow the fruit to warm up so it begins to ferment on its own, leaving the juice in contact with the grape skins for 80 days. Bottled after six months resting in older French barriques, the wine feels completely knit, light and fresh, with scents of green peppercorn, green olive and delicate red fruit ghosting a trail of flavor that draws you back to the glass—a kind of salty, spicy magnetism. Deanna Connella, a chef on staff who wrote about her recent conversion to grenache (Fall 2018), suggested serving this with lamb braised in white wine, mint, chile peppers, red onions and a late addition of steamed clams. **94 POINTS, WINE & SPIRITS MAGAZINE**

An attractive fusion of roses and raspberries on the nose with freshness and purity. A hint of wild herbs, too. The palate delivers a silky, slightly round central core of strawberries and wild raspberries. Quite powerful and subtly smoky. It expands long into the finish. Delicious now, but it'll be even better in a couple of years. **94 POINTS, JAMES SUCKLING**
