

KOERNER, Clare Valley

Damon Koerner is a most unlikely rebel. Under a mop of dark hair, behind a hesitantly shy smile, his slow Aussie drawl was so quiet I had to bend in to hear him ... and then try coax him from his reluctance to say one word more than was absolutely necessary. It was all a far cry from the (charming, I admit) bombast and braggadocio I encountered all over the Australian winelands. He and his younger brother Jono grew up on their parents' grape farm, Gullyview, in Leasingham, Clare Valley. His parents have been grape growers for just about all their adult lives, selling fruit to Penfolds and Treasury Wine Estates, Orlando, Pikes and Taylors. Damon and Jono grew up among the vines, on tractors before they could walk, and working in the vineyards on weekends and school holidays.

Damon's father, Anthony Koerner, built up their 50-ha vineyard from practically nothing, buying neighbouring properties as they became available, farming conventionally, carefully, and planting to meet the requirements of the conservative Clare Valley market. But he never made a drop of wine.

His eldest son left school, kicked around a bit at Peter Lehmann in Barossa, did a bit of work for his dad, tinkered with landscaping and ended up on Christmas Island in the middle of the Indian Ocean doing landscaping for the then-new immigrant detention centre. It gave him time to think, and when he headed home it was with new focus: time to get a degree, settle down, grow grapes.

For the next four years he studied oenology and viticulture at Adelaide University, worked at Petaluma and The Lane Vineyard in Adelaide, Hugel in Alsace, Ch de Bérú in Chablis, spent time in Bandol and developed a soft spot for Mourvèdre.

France changed things. 'What I learned at university was very scientific, winemaking by numbers. In France, in these biodynamic wineries and organic vineyards, you're seeing how they do things without these rules. It's not "the Adelaide University way" but it works. It's not all clinical and clean but the wines are good.'

We met Damon at the impeccably neat homestead of his parents' farm, surrounded by garrisons of vines with scarcely a weed out of place in the rusty terra rossa soil. You can see at a glance that it defines the terroir of Gullyview vineyards. Climbing into his pickup, we headed out to look at the beautiful Grace parcel of 44-year-old Riesling vines growing on their own roots.

I asked about how the vines were farmed. Conventionally, 'but we're working on it'. They're working with (and on) vineyards belonging to their parents and neighbour Rob Tiver, so they are not in a position to call the shots but as far as I could read between the lines, organic farming was part of the plan if not currently a work in progress. The picture below is Rob Tiver (on the left) and Damon in Tiver's Vivian vineyard where he grows Sciacarello and Sangiovese for the Koerner wines. Tiver's vineyards certainly looked full of organic life.



The brothers started making Koerner wines in 2014 and from the get-go it was clear they were not going to conform to classic Clare correctness. Skin-contact whites, indigenous-yeast fermentation, amphorae, Slavonian oak, no fining, no filtering, no corrections, unpronounceable Corsican varieties, labels that look like reincarnated vintage Penguin Library Classics covers, and cloudy wines: however laconic and reserved the Koerner men might be, their winemaking is anything but.

What struck me, however, was how un-alternative the set-up seemed. Nothing about them, their modern, clean [website](#), their simple tasting room, or the way they talked about their wines hinted at 'natural wine'. There was no evangelical spiel, no polarising standpoints, no grandstanding. At most, a shrug and an admission that they were still young and wanted to push the boundaries while they could, but were trying to keep things simple: to play around but not mess around; to make wines they liked to drink. The reticence in that tasting room was restful.



With so many startling, memorable, iconic and stunning wines tasted on my first-ever trip to Australia, it's foolhardy to call favourites. But the Koerners' were the wines for which I was prepared to lose all my shoes to make room for bottles in my suitcase. My ever-practical husband intervened, objecting on the grounds of weight. I came home with my shoes and have been pining for their Vermentinos ever since. Their Rolle (the Vermentino synonym they've chosen to call one of their wines) could quite possibly be one of the best Vermentinos I have tasted.

Much to my regret, we couldn't taste their varietal Mammolo, Cannonau and Nielluccio because they'd literally sold out of every bottle they had, and the 2018s were still not ready. If you're lucky enough to get your hands on these totally Australian-but-with-European-elegance Koerner wines, buy them. They don't make enough. Their wines are imported into the UK by Knotted Vine and also imported into the [USA](#), [Singapore](#) and [Japan](#).



Koerner, GV1 Gullyview Vineyard Riesling 2017 Clare Valley

From the 43-year-old vines on GV1 (Gullyview vineyard), southern aspect and bony clay over limestone. Skin contact overnight, indigenous-yeast fermented in 50% amphora, 50% stainless steel. Lemon-scented rocks and white lime flowers. Gave me goosebumps – incredibly limey, unusual [guarana](#) notes. So whistle-clean and racy and piercing. Intensely lime, shimmering with acidity and structure in a way that fills the mouth with a kaleidoscope of light. This tastes as if it is plumbed into the earth and rocks.

(TC)

Drink 2020 – 2022

AU\$50 cellar door

17

Koerner, Gullyview Vineyard Pigato 2018 Clare Valley

*This was the hot vintage. 100% Vermentino from the family property, planted just south of the Grace vineyard – slight northern aspect, red clay over limestone. Hand picked on 9 and [12 March](#) at 10.5 and 11 Baumé respectively. 100% destemmed, whole berries, open-top fermenters. Half was fermented at 10 °C on skins for a month, half at ambient temperature on skins for three weeks. ('Cold ferment', Damon told me, 'gives wine structure and backbone and ambient lift and flavour'.) The ferments were hand plunged once a day before pressing. Matured in stainless-steel tanks on fine lees for six months. Prior to bottling the wine was racked and a small sulphur addition made. Bottled unfinned and unfiltered. Slightly cloudy lemon. Smells of grapefruit and at first it tastes of cold, sharp white-morning grapefruit and herbs and green vineyard peaches. And then it fills all the corners with yogurt tang and creaminess and like clean white sheets kicking on the washing line. Vibrant, and basically unspittable. You could drink this for breakfast. **GV** (TC)*

Drink 2018 – 2020

AU\$30 cellar door

17

Koerner, Gullyview Vineyard Rolle 2017 Clare Valley

Bit more classic in terms of winemaking. On skins overnight, fermented in 2000-litre Slavonian oak foudre. Very savoury nose. Slightly smoky, and like a warm almond croissant with lemon-peel dukka. So much broader and fuller than Pigato, layer upon layer of aromatics, flavour, texture, concentration. Roasted grapefruit, saltiness, Moroccan preserved lemons, sweet apricots. Ringing with joy, a carillon of bells. It has beautiful, confident clarity, a structural acidity that pulls firm and sure through the wine, spreading fan-like across the finish. Electric. Long. Brilliant. (TC)

Drink 2018 – 2021

AU\$35 cellar door

17.5

Koerner, Tiver Rosé 2018 Clare Valley

*Named after neighbour Rob Tiver, who had gone abroad in search of Sangiovese and come back with a few extra bundles of Sciaccarello (aka Mammolo). When he offered it to the boys, who were already buying Sangiovese off him, their jaws hit the floor. Jono had fallen for the variety when doing a vintage at the organic Clos Signadore on Corsica, and this offer of the variety literally on their doorstep was pure serendipity. Picked from Rob Tiver's Vivian vineyard [on 25 February](#). 75% Sangiovese, 25% Sciaccarello. All destemmed, crushed, on skins for 24 hours, pressed and settled overnight. Natural fermentation in ceramic amphoras, on full lees for two months, blended and then five/six months on fine lees in stainless steel. A small sulphur addition at bottling, unfinned, unfiltered. Pale orangey colour. Smells like bitter oranges and fresh tobacco leaf. Really dry, leafy, fresh, and so damn crunchy it makes my bones judder. Wonderful Italianate sweet-bitterness, a vinous negroni complete with orange peel and *chinotto* and sour cherries and this delicious, zappy spiciness. Pink peppercorns. Such a foodie rosé! I could drink this every day. (TC)*

Drink 2018 – 2020

AU\$30 cellar door

17

Koerner, La Corse 2018 Clare Valley

NB was La Corse in previous vintages. 60% Sangiovese, 20% Grenache, 15% Sciaccarello and 5% Malbec from Gullyview, Vivian and Bass Hill vineyards. The fruit was picked over various days throughout vintage. 100% destemmed but whole-berry ferments, indigenous yeasts, light hand plunging once a day, twice during peak ferment. Fermentation lasted about two weeks. Following this the fruit was pressed to tank where it settled off gross lees for a few days and was then transferred to ceramic amphora and old oak for three months. Blended to steel tank and on fine lees for six months. A small sulphur addition at bottling, unfinned, unfiltered. Cloudy cherry red. Satisfyingly chewy tannins but not remotely dry. Incredibly sappy and juicy. Peppery, dark cherries and tangy English-hedgerow berries and so thirst-quenching. This is totally appetising. A shot of minty fragrance through the middle. Fabulous! Sassy, persistent, full of wiry, punky attitude. (TC)

Drink 2019 – 2024

AU\$30 cellar door

17

Koerner, Classico 2016 Clare Valley

95% Cabernet, 5% Malbec. Their classic Clare red wine (except, I would add, that few Clare reds are coming in at a natural 12.5%...) On skins for three or four weeks. Aged in French oak, some new, some old, for 12 months. Dark, cloudy, ruby-glow black. Beautiful nose – smells of eucalyptus forest at dawn and deep glorious fruit. Pure, soaring, and sweet as bird song. Fine spice, racy acidity. Tannins resolved, sinews melting into black, glossy, jewelled fruit. How you pack that much ripe abundance into 12.5%, is nothing short of a miracle. Damon Koerner has a gift which is going to be much sought after in the hotter vintages to come. (TC)

Drink 2019 – 2026

AU\$50 cellar door

17.5