

Drinking

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TREASURE HUNT

Some soils can yield gold

In the wine world, there is not much that is unexpected – wines that are truly surprising and ground breaking. Many of the great wine regions were discovered decades, if not centuries, ago and their secrets are now plain to see.

A little pocket of rare soils made up of ancient oyster shells that provide a strong signature, as found in Chablis, has made that town famous as a home for some of the world's finest chardonnay. A unique climate in the hills close to Turin in Italy, with a combination of the nearby cooling alps and a natural heat trap, helps nebbiolo reach its lofty best. Uncovering these gems, however, is a slow process and has taken centuries of trial and error. It is a painstaking business akin to prospecting for gold – following a hunch in search of vinous treasure.

It requires the planting of various grape varieties, which are then tested over decades in a range of different vineyards to uncover whether a magic combination exists, although the results more often than not disappoint. Vines are so fickle that seemingly identical places can make very different wines. So it really is only through the combination of experimentation and time that great wine regions can be uncovered. The French have been at it for more than a thousand years and its major wine regions today are only a selection of what were planted in the past, with some formerly important areas now consigned to history. Over time, they just did not stack up.

Australia, though, is a little different, as a relatively young wine country. In some ways we are only at the start of our journey, with the additional element of a changing climate to take into account. Geography has been a big part of the wine regions that have been developed to date.

The Hunter Valley proved to be a fertile region close to a growing town and was first planted with vines almost 200 years ago. Over time, it turned out those forefathers had chosen well, probably owing more to good luck than viticultural skill. Regions such as Margaret River and Frankland River, however, were developed more thoughtfully, with academics pointing budding winemakers in the right direction. But as a large country, and with wine quality so fickle and dependent on the alchemy of grape, climate and soil, there is little doubt that nuggets of vinous gold still await discovery.

Coonawarra has long been a source of some of Australia's top cabernet sauvignon, thanks to its maritime climate and terra rossa soils. Nearby, however, is also a happy hunting ground for emerging wine regions.

Wrattonbully, with similar soils to Coonawarra's and a slightly warmer climate, has already put itself on the map. However there's another place, with at the moment just a handful of vineyards, that may trump them all in



Photo: Nick Cubbin

Ottelia Riesling 2019

A wine of super purity and focus showing concentrated but understated fruits – green apple and citrus with chalky complexity. It is followed by a lightweight palate with mainly citrus flavours lifted by an intriguing smoky edge. A crisp and very fine style of riesling with a lingering and silky finish.

Ottelia Pinot Gris 2019

This wine is a little different as it has been crafted with fruit from Robe and Mount Gambier and is the boldest of the three. Some pretty pear, musk and citrus fruits lead to a bright, fresh and slightly textural palate, making for an attractive, food-friendly style.

Ottelia Chardonnay 2019

French clones combined with the cool Mount Gambier climate have made this a tight and elegant style of chardonnay. Citrus and honeydew melon aromas are accented by subtle, spicy oak with some savoury lees complexity. It is then compact and bright on the palate with tangy acidity driving a long, chalky finish.

time: the until now unheralded region of Mount Gambier. Its wines are incredibly different from what you'd expect, and almost polar opposites to those of Wrattobully and Coonawarra. They jump out of the glass and immediately show a stunningly different expression of South Australian wine. The vineyards are closer to the ocean than Coonawarra's so the climate is distinctly cooler, but it is what lies beneath the vineyard that seems to have the biggest impact.

Below a thin layer of rocky ground is a complex bed of flinty calcrete, similar to limestone – not unlike the soils seen in some parts of France, such as in Sancerre. It gives the wines a vivid, piercing fruit character, and there is also a strong earthy, savoury, almost smoky element in what are fine and detailed wines.

This is one of the few wine regions in the country where you can actually taste the soil – in this case in the form of chalky and smoky nuances.

As a young region, Mount Gambier has only a small number of wineries at present, with Ottelia the best known. A family operation, it was founded by John Innes, who has a long history of wine making in Coonawarra and the surrounding regions. The Ottelia range is subtle and understated, and offers exceptional value.

No doubt it is early days but the region is off to a very strong start.