



T O R B R E C K

BAROSSA VALLEY

TORBRECK: A PROFILE FROM THIS CULT BAROSSA NAME



Crowned by The Laird and Runrig, the bold, plush ageworthy reds from Torbreck in the Barossa Valley are among Australia's most collectable wines. Chief winemaker Ian Hongell reveals that the secret is all down to the pedigree of its vineyards and a 'go hard or go home' approach to picking dates.

Years ago when interviewing Ian Hongell, he dismissed generic stereotypes about South Australia's Barossa Valley: 'it's not one flat paddock!' Back then he worked for Peter Lehmann. Today Hongell is chief winemaker and general manager at Torbreck, a winery that shot to fame in the 1990s by cherry-picking the best of that 'paddock'.

Influential US critic Robert Parker gave rave reviews for Torbreck's opulent Shiraz-based wines, sourced from select dry-grown, old-vine parcels, vinified in small batches and seamlessly constructed. Parker awarded 100 points to the inaugural 2005 vintage of The Laird, Torbreck's flagship single-vineyard Shiraz, now among Australia's most expensive wines.

Dave Powell, a self-taught winemaker intent in his pursuit of high-end Barossa Shiraz, founded Torbreck in 1994. 'It was remarkable what Dave achieved in the period he was involved with the business,' reflected Hongell. 'He broke ground for many Australian producers.'

Hongell admits that, prior to joining Torbreck, he'd not fully appreciated the pedigree of its 85ha of estate and 200ha of contract fruit sources.

Torbreck pays more than AU\$10,000/tonne for top grapes. Before acquiring The Laird vineyard in 2014 (allegedly Australia's most expensive vineyard purchase by price per hectare) Torbreck reportedly paid AU\$20,000/tonne for its grapes.

Within this elevated price range 'you're genuinely accessing different fruit – little bullets that sit on the vine, enduring the season. They give lovely woody tannins and colour, stable anthocyanins and tannins, but the wines are still primary and vibrant.'

Sticking to the Torbreck blueprint

Hongell joined Torbreck in 2017, by which time the company had changed hands twice. First in 2003 (following its receivership), then in 2008 when acquired by American ecommerce magnate Peter Kight, the current owner. Powell remained at Torbreck until 2013, leaving following an acrimonious spat with Kight.

Speculation was rife that Torbreck would falter without its charismatic founder, but the wines continue to sell out. 'With gentle price increases across the portfolio,' adds Hongell. Two extraordinarily low-yielding vintages in 2019 and 2020 saw them over-allocated.



“ WE WANT YOU TO SMELL THE AROMAS AND TASTE THE FRUIT ”

IAN HONGELL

Hongell says that with ‘amazing wines and an amazing brand’, his brief was simple: to keep making Torbreck. The core DNA of the wines revolves around the vineyards, which are substantially the same as they’ve always been. They are focused on the elevated slopes and depleted soils of the Barossa Valley’s Western Ridge and Lyndoch, plus an Eden Valley component.

Winemaker Scott McDonald – a veteran of 16 Torbreck vintages – is well-versed in the signature grape handling and maturation regime. There was a blueprint, said Hongell, and making wine is a team effort.

Perfumed, with lashings of velvety fruit and tannins, the latest releases are as sensual – languorous even – as ever. Despite the hefty alcohols, they remain remarkably balanced. Tasting them over four days, the intrinsic freshness of the fruit impressed. It shows how much these wines will continue to develop and improve with age.

‘We want you to smell the aromas and taste the fruit,’ explains Hongell. ‘Mature, very fine tannins rein the fruit in, setting the wines up for longevity.’ He enjoys the reds in their first five years when they are upfront, and then around 15 to 20 years from vintage ‘when the vineyard character really shows up’.

Taking the risks on ripeness

Torbreck’s ‘go hard or go home’ methods of late picking and dry farming in a region that sometimes goes without rain for 300 days in a year has given Hongell sleepless nights. If a weather front comes in but the grapes are

not ready to pick ‘we hang on the edge and gamble – we’re about creating flavours and textures that only time can give’. Hongell’s nickname is ‘rhino hide’ for his steadfast resistance to growers anxious to pick.

And this ability to pick so late is thanks to site selection, deep-rooted old vines and chief viticulturist Nigel Blieschke’s rigorous vineyard management. Blieschke zealously measures bud counts and yields to avoid fruit cooking inside the berry and collapsing – ‘we hate undesirable Porty or sweet and sour flavours,’ asserts Hongell. With such low yields, ‘awesome pH’ contributes to the wines’ natural balance.

To balance its ultra-concentrated fruit, The Laird’s lavish oak comes courtesy of ‘magic barrels’ from Dominique Laurent, the Burgundian winemaker who established his own cooperage.

Exclusive to the flagship Shiraz, the extra-thick staved barriques are made from particularly tight grained French oak, seasoned and toasted slowly for slow-leaching tannins and oxidation.

At the other end of the spectrum, Cuvée Juveniles – a luscious Grenache–Shiraz–Mataroblend – sees no oak. In between, Hongell uses fine, tight barriques, up to 50% new, plus an increasing number (currently 30) of French oak foudres ‘in quite judicious ratios relative to the wines’. The wines are all unfinned and filtered, and Hongell recently introduced temperature and humidity management in the cellar.

Paying it forward

There are no plans to expand production, although in 2019 Torbreck acquired Escarpment Winery in Martinborough, New Zealand from Larry McKenna, who continues to make its acclaimed Pinot Noir). In the Barossa, where land values have skyrocketed, the focus is about securing the highest-quality fruit from existing vineyards and safeguarding the brand’s future. Just as Powell planted the Descendant vineyard to old-vine Runrig Shiraz cuttings in 1994, the Daylight Chamber vineyard has been planted to heritage clones – cuttings from exceptional Torbreck-owned and grower Shiraz vineyards.

Meanwhile, the Hillside vineyard has been supplemented with parcels of Clairette, Grenache Blanc, Marsanne, Viognier, Roussanne, Carignan and Counoise. ‘Salt and pepper,’ says Hongell, ‘to sharpen aromatics, and tweak and tighten up a broader, denser wine without losing its identity or changing our style’.

Hongell believes these new vineyards are less susceptible to modern diseases like eutypa dieback. In 150 years, he speculates, future generations might feel as thankful about working with centenarian vineyards as he does today. ‘Torbreck stands for the preservation of history and sites so we are paying it forward.’

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2016 THE LAIRD

RATING: 98

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Shiraz

An immense, brooding seam of black fruits behind rich smokehouse oak and layered taffeta tannins. Flavours of melted chocolate, espresso, cep powder and graphite shroud iron, earth and garrigue-edged black and purple berries, black olive, blackberry liqueur and sweet Agen prunes. Coaxed out with plenty of air, it is vital and violet-scented by day four. Beauty meets the beast – unique. Drinking Window 2025 - 2038

2018 THE FACTOR

RATING: 96

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Shiraz

Chock full of flavour, this charismatic Shiraz oozes Barossa from every pore. Fine tannins tightly frame black cherry-berry fruit, cep powder, cocoa and iron filings for a dry profile and compelling tension. In and among it all, notes of smoked meat, espresso, cedar, graphite, garrigue and violet creams snag the attention. Incisive acidity enhances length and drive. Drinking Window 2024 - 2038

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2018 RUNRIG

RATING: 99

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Shiraz Viognier

The must-try wine. Tightly wound yet with cashmere tannins, soft kid-glove oak and cut-finger minerality. The anise, clove and cinnamon-edged palate is unbelievably svelte, like melted chocolate. On day two, succulent, spicy cherry fruit emerges, with blackberry liqueur, roses and violets. Savoury cep undertones, graphite and cedar follow through on an endless finish. A stunning blend of six old vineyards, one planted in the 1850s. Drinking Window 2025 - 2040

2019 THE STRUIE

RATING: 95

FROM: Barossa, South Australia

VARIETY: Shiraz

The best value The higher, tighter acid line, lifted violets and minerality speak of the Eden Valley component (8%) and the Barossa Valley's elevated Western Ranges. Palate-staining crushed bilberry, blackberry, blackcurrant and raspberry and complex bitter chocolate, mocha, graphite and saline layers. Abundant but fine, sinewy tannins foreclose on the finish. Intense and still coming together, with great potential. Drinking Window 2022 - 2035

2018 DESCENDANT

RATING: 97

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Shiraz Viognier

Heritage cuttings (and second-fill barriques) from Runrig lend pedigree to this single-vineyard co-fermented Shiraz and Viognier (8%) from Marananga. Younger vines (planted 1994) give flamboyant notes of soaring violets, luscious summer pudding fruit, cedar, anise, black pepper, stem ginger, apricot glaze and iron minerality. Silky milk chocolate texture, feathery tannins and cleansing acidity brings terrific finesse to the elegant finish. Bravo!

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2019 THE STEADING

RATING: 94

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Grenache Shiraz Mataro

Ripe but sinewy tannins mesh beautifully with dark berry and black olive on the chamois-smooth palate. There's smoked meat, ink, lavender and Turkish Delight riffs, with iron filing minerality to the lengthy finish. Sourced from 40- to 150-year-old vines from Gomersal, Lyndoch, Greenock, Moppa, Marananga, Seppeltsfield and Ebenezer, this polished 60% Grenache blended with Shiraz and Mataro is aged in 4,500-litre French oak foudres. Drinking Window 2021 - 2030

2018 HILLSIDE VINEYARD GRENACHE

RATING: 94

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Grenache

The hidden gem A cuvée first made in 2016, the Hillside vineyard's southerly Lyndoch location and 1949 vines shower the creamy red berry and firmer cherrystone palate with violets, pot pourri and spice – varietal characters that shine, thanks to ageing in 2,400-litre French oak foudres. Five spice, white pepper and sandalwood notes build on a tapering, tangy ironstone finish, with chalky tannins and harmonious acidity. Drinking Window 2021 - 2030



2018 LES AMIS

RATING: 94

FROM: Barossa Valley, Eden Valley
South Australia

VARIETY: Grenache

Slade Vineyard's rare small-cluster, small-berry clone provides the platform for ageing, hence maturation in 40% new French barriques. Ripe but dense tannin layers, sarsaparilla oak spice and warming kirsch notes initially dominate the concentrated seam of dried raspberry, fresh blueberry and strawberry fruit leather. With time and air it opens to Turkish Delight, chocolate, liquorice, dried herbs and baking spice nuances. Needs time. Drinking Window 2023 - 2033

2018 THE PICT

RATING: 93

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Mataro

Dense, sun-kissed Mataro (aka Mourvèdre) from a Northern Greenock vineyard planted exclusively to the variety in the 1920s. There's a tang of blood, black olive, dark chocolate and warm earth to its broad, rich palate of garrigue-edged Agen prunes and berry fruit. On day two, the sinewy, spicy tannins assert themselves, lending peppery back palate resonance – balance for the warmth and generosity. Drinking Window 2023 - 2033

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2019 CUVÉE JUVENILES

RATING: 89

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Grenache Mourvèdre Shiraz

Unoaked, medium-bodied yet luscious, this enticing spice-scented blend of 72% Grenache, 23% Mataro and 5% Shiraz combines juicy red cherry and plum fruit with raspberry and blackberry, crunchier pomegranate and a lick of pomegranate syrup. Mostly sourced from old, unirrigated vineyards, meaty undertones and sandalwood add savoury nuance. Deftly carries its alcohol, finishing clean and surprisingly fresh. Drinking Window 2021 - 2026

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2019 WOODCUTTER'S SHIRAZ

RATING: 91

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Shiraz

The low-yielding vintage of small berries with dark, thick skins lends intensity and structure to the palate of blood plum and vibrant raspberry and blackberry. Ageing in well-seasoned French oak hogsheads and foudres make for a vivacious expression, with tapering, spicy tannins and a milk chocolate finish. Classic Torbreck sourcing from young vines in Marananga, Greenock, Seppeltsfield, Gomersal, Moppa, Lyndoch, Ebenezer vineyards. Drinking Window 2021 - 2029

2019 THE STEADING BLANC

RATING: 89

FROM: Barossa Valley, South Australia

VARIETY: Roussanne Marsanne Viognier

A green edge of fennel and almond to the nose and palate, along with honeydew melon, marshmallow, greengage and tart pineapple nuances and lemony acidity. A Marsanne-led blend which (along with the 10% Viognier) is barrel-fermented and aged, save for the Roussanne. Oak (14% new) lends structure and a vanilla accent, while eight months on lees gives a light texture. Sourced entirely from the Descendant Vineyard. Drinking Window 2021 - 2024

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