



The West Australian

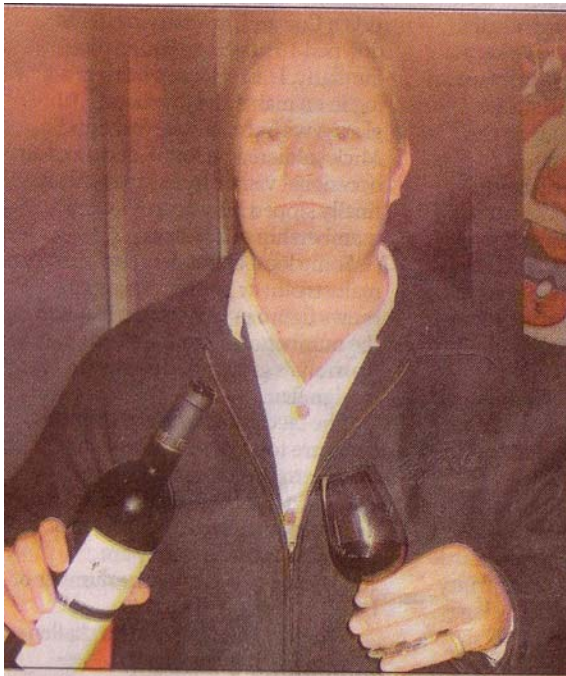
Wine

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CLAIRAULT TAKE STRONG NEW DIRECTION

'Clairault is one of those places that should be on everyone's itinerary when they visit Margaret River'



Clairault winemaker Will Shields pursues perfect wine.

I couldn't help admiring Will Shields' honesty. I hadn't caught up with the Clairault winemaker for a couple of years and he wanted to bring me up to speed with the full range of wines.

Well, almost the full range of wines. One was missing. The 2002 cabernet merlot. I'm told it's a bloody beauty. Shields told me that. He really wanted me to taste it. Problem was that it wasn't there.

"My girlfriend opened it last night and drank it," he said. "Oh, she'll kill me for telling you that. You won't mention it will you?"

Nah, wouldn't do it chum. Let me know how you go tonight though.

Anyway, minus the 2002 we pressed on. I've tasted Clairault wines many times over the years, seen some good ones at times but been disappointed in others, but I was keen to talk to Shields about the new direction he was taking.

In the main it is no different to most winemakers. It's about getting better structure, more intensity and more finesse. To do this he is seeking more depth, intensity and flavour in the fruit. This is being achieved with subtle changes in the vineyard and gradually moving fruit from some of the more recent plantings into the premium Estate range.

It's funny that while vine maturity is important, so is site and it appears that some of those recent planting sites have been showing great promise and are starting to play a more significant role in the wines.



This year Clairault is also starting to move towards organics in the vineyard. Now this can mean an extreme makeover, but Shields believes that a gradual transition over the next seven years, adopting some biodynamic principles, will result in better fruit and better wines.

Clairault is one of those places that should be on everyone's itinerary when they visit Margaret River. The wines are good, the food is excellent and the setting stunning. It has come a long way since Bill Martin bought the place a few years ago – a far cry from the quaint winery and cellar door it once was and is now a modern winery and cellar area, plus a magnificent bistro-style restaurant set amid lawns and towering gums. The wines are generally excellent value for money and very consistent.

The Clairault varietal sauvignon blanc 2004 (\$20) is a tight and lively expression of this variety, showing less obvious herbaceousness and more of a keen mineral and citrus tang. It's an eminently drinkable wine and ideal if you are not into those big herbaceous numbers that smack of all that green bean character.

The Clairault Estate semillon 2002 (\$24) is a pretty smart wine showing a tight and controlled palate that's been held with crisp fine acid, with a little oak influence playing its part as well. This restrained and controlled style is something that Shields is moving more towards with the Estate range.

There are two chardonnays. The varietal chardonnay 2003 (\$20) delivers excellent value for money and a degree of higher priced sophistication that comes from some oak maturation, a little malolactic fermentation and some solid work that adds some pleasant mouth feel and texture.

The Estate chardonnay 2003 (\$29) has given Shields his chance to play around with the scary thing called wild ferments. This adds a degree of funky character to the nose and palate and with the malolactic fermentation and some quality oak treatment it really does come together into an impressively presented package.

In the past the reds have been a little varied, but I think under Shield's direction and with increasingly mature vineyards, not only those original plantings, coming into play, things will look a lot better.

The shiraz 2002 (\$20) has been sourced from around the region and provides a fresh lively and vibrant expression of the variety. It's medium weight with nice cherry and light plum flavours. Very easy drinking wine.

The cabernet sauvignon 2002 (\$20) is similarly medium weight and vibrant with distinct minty and slightly bay leaf black olive nuances. The Estate cabernet merlot 2001 (\$29) is solid, tight and stacked with firm tannins and substantial oak. There is just a touch of herbal greenness but the fruit seems to carry that. I think more will be revealed as it ages.

The Estate cabernet sauvignon 2001 (\$36) is a more substantial and classical Margaret River wine, packed to the gunwales with firm, tight and slightly grippy fruit. The tannins are quiet fine and there is good depth and intensity. It's well balanced too.

I think Clairault has only just started to scratch the surface of its potential and there are excellent things ahead.