

Heirs and graces of the Pannell family's Picardy pinot noirs

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FOR some families, wine runs through their veins. Its creation is not a vocation nor a career; rather it is a calling.

And the Pannell family from Western Australia, first in Margaret River and more recently in Pemberton, are very much in that mould. In their more than 45 years in the wine trade, Bill and his family have scaled the greatest heights yet remain to this day working vigneron. Bill still spends up to 50 hours a week in the vineyard when many his age are more than happy to let the younger generation take the reins.

The Pannell family wine history began in the Margaret River in the late 1960s. It was a magical time in WA's most famous region with many of the area's greatest names, such as Cullen and Vasse Felix, just getting started. Among them was qualified doctor Bill Pannell and his wife, Sandra, who, spurred on by conversations with Max Lake of Lake's Folly fame and John Brown of Brown Brothers, among others, went about establishing one of the area's first wineries.

Bill went digging around Margaret River using his scientific training to measure the various soil profiles before finally settling on a site on Metricup Road for his winery that became known as Moss Wood. At the time, the couple with their young children could hardly have known that they had founded a name that would help to establish the credentials of Margaret River to the world and that some of their children would successfully follow those first brave footsteps.

By 1985, Moss Wood had well and truly become one of Margaret River's most highly regarded labels, which it remains. But the almost 20 years of combining work as a local GP, the toil of a vigneron and family commitments had taken their toll and the once-fervent passion was on the wane. Or perhaps it had just shifted gear.

Despite having planted pinot noir in the Moss Wood vineyard since 1974, it was not until 1980 that Bill had his epiphany with this most fickle of grapes through a bottle of Bouchard Chambertin Clos de Beze from the great 1966 vintage. "Why am I wasting my life on Cabernet?" is Bill's take on the moment that sealed his move from Moss Wood and the establishment of Picardy in Pemberton. In 1985, Moss Wood was sold to the very capable Keith and Clare Mugford, with Bill and Sandra generously helping to finance the purchase. But Bill wasn't going to just jump in boots and all with Pinot Noir - rather, it was time to take stock and immerse himself in great wine before taking the leap and planting the new vineyards.

Fortunately, a golden opportunity presented itself on a platter with a share in the well-regarded French Burgundy Domaine de la Pousse d'Or becoming available - where better to learn about Pinot Noir than from those whom had been growing and making it for centuries? In Burgundy, Bill studied the soils, the clones and the winemaking, especially while working the 1988 vintage, training that shows itself in the restrained power and delicacy seen in the Picardy pinot noirs.

Picardy was established in 1993 in southern WA close to the small, isolated town of Pemberton. Unlike the Margaret River with its warm Indian Ocean-influenced climate, Pemberton is cool, even cooler than Burgundy, with the Southern Ocean and winds drawn from Antarctica helping to keep summers temperate and winters cold.

The Picardy vineyards are slightly elevated and roughly modelled on a traditional Burgundian domaine with fruit all estate grown and winemaking on site. Numerous clones make up the vineyards with some closed spaced parcels to increase quality. The vineyard is planted with traditional Burgundian varieties, chardonnay and pinot noir, as well as shiraz, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, semillon and sauvignon blanc, with all the wines having a European, savoury edge. While pinot noir and merlot enjoy much of the focus Bill admits "chardonnay has become a passion".

Today three generations of the Pannell family live at Picardy with Bill ably assisted by son Dan in the winery and the vineyard, in what Bill refers to as the young bull-old bull team. While Bill studies the wine journals and takes the more academic and cerebral approach, Dan does some, but not all, of the hard yacka. The wines are stylish, elegant traditional styles with finesse and genuine character. For many wine drinkers they are also some of the finest Australian wines that you have never heard of.

Picardy Pinot Noir 2011

If there is one wine that showcases the best of Picardy it is its delicious pinot noir. The 2011 is a very elegant and fragrant style that, while delicately coloured, shows layers of concentrated fruit. Wild strawberry, mushroom, spice and raspberry fruit sit on a fresh mid-weight palate, finishing long, silky and fine.

Picardy Merlot Cabernet Sauvignon 2010

A very un-Australian merlot blend that is savoury, structured and will reward bottle aging with fragrant, cedar, blackcurrant fruits that are fleshy yet underpinned by structural tannins. A food style and a good one at that.

Picardy Chardonnay 2011

A very impressive yet restrained chardonnay showing citrus, apple and white peach fruits well balanced with creamy, spicy oak. Highly complex in the mouth with buttery/nutty complexity that is punctuated with fresh acidity it is a wine that will flower in the bottle.



Picardy Pinot Noir 2011, Picardy Merlot Cabernet Sauvignon 2010, Picardy Chardonnay 2011. Source: Supplied