FREE SPIRITS

It's not all corporate giants in South Australia. The state has a host of enterprising, daring winemakers taming remote sites, championing unusual grapes and designing quirky labels. ***PHILIP WHITE*** *meets a few*

Piombo, McLaren Vale

Paul Petagna *(above)* is a hardcore shedtser who uses words like 'ethos'. He was a computer graphics wiz until his father-in-law, Modestino Piombo, took him into his shed at McLaren Vale and taught him to make wine. With thirsty curiosity and measured confidence, he makes soulful, hearty drinks simmering more with Italian genetics than any Aussie industrial sophistry.

Petagna also cooks like a master: he has the sort of gastronomic savvy the Australian wine industry's short of. And he's never been lobotomised by wine studies at the University of Adelaide or Roseworthy. He makes wines from the belly up.

Similarly, without any rockdoctor training, he isolated a string of gnarly vineyards on the rubbly Willunga Escarpment, on the coast at McLaren Vale. Geologists can draw a line where this terrain ceases and gives way to hopeless black Bay of Biscay cracking clay; Petagna seems to have done it by smell. He buys from these growers to blend with the little vineyard Modestino left him upon his death. Finally, his graphic design skill puts him beyond the gazillion winemakers who can only pretend knowledge of label art.

Apart from some remarkable soon-to-be released fortifieds, including a bone-dry white that tastes like a savoury Vermouth base, Petagna's Piombo triumphs are the lovely Dio, a Grenache-Shiraz-Mourvedre trinity; and Diavolo, a Shiraz-Cabernet. Harmonious gems with ethos and earth aplenty.

Jeanneret & Good Catholic Girl, Clare

Years ago, when the River Murray still flowed rapidly into the sea, Clare winemaker Ben Jeanneret (below) irritated neighbours who piped its salty water on their industrial vineyards. He wrote on the back labels of Jeanneret bottles that no Murray water was used to irrigate vines. Environmentalists loved it and Jeanneret became a reluctant hero.

When authorities banned the use of the word Moscato (as in d'Asti), Jeanneret labelled his *frizzante* Muscat Blanc à Petit Grains as 'Mosquito'. Sales boomed.

He makes wine in the most natural, industrochemical-free way possible. While his clean, svelte reds stand out, his Rieslings were among the first to break from the traditional steely, humourless style, with a touch of wild yeast adding fragrance and allure to their sinuous form.

Jeanneret's partner, Julie Barry, of the Jim Barry Wines tribe, has her own vineyard next to the latter's famous Armagh; her James Brazill Shiraz is made with similar attention but sells at a skerrick of the cost.Her Rieslings are also eccentric glories: bigger and bustier than most, but still perfectly poised. Both are under the Good Catholic Girl brand, labelled with the cover of her catechism book.

Yangarra Estate, McLaren Vale

Peter Fraser *(above)* is the winemaker/manager of Yangarra, a 170-hectare Aussie slice of the huge Californian Kendall-Jackson empire. In the decade since its purchase, Fraser has led a charge towards wine more spiritually entwined with the Mediterranean coast of Spain and France than anywhere else. Why? Because he believes McLaren Vale has the best Mediterranean climate on Earth.

Fraser and vineyard wizard Michael Lane have ripped out modern, trellised vineyards of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to plant bushvines of Tempranillo, Graciano, Mourvedre, Cinsault and Carignan. This adds deep blending texture to their trellised plantings of Roussanne, Viognier, Shiraz, Mourvedre and Grenache. Grenache Blanc and Counoise are on the way, Vaccarèse and Bourboulenc on the cards.

At night, Yangarra is cooled by air spilling from the Adelaide Hills, making a sharp diurnal contrast to its hot, sunny days. Its distinct geologies include rounded riverine pebbles, a great wind-blown sand dune covered with healthy 65-year-old unirrigated bushvine Grenache, and a prominent ridge bony with ironstone.

Wild yeasts, older barrels, small batches, minimal intervention, then masterly blending gives unusually fine, gentle wines from across these distinctive terrains. The highlight, High Sands Bushvine Grenache, will soon be joined by Ironheart Shiraz, from the ironstone vineyards.

Using biodynamic principles, Yangarra is in transition to full organic certification. A radical new small-batch winery will be finished for 2010.

Some Young Punks,
all over South Australia

Dr Col McBride *(second from left)* has tattoos all over his very large muscles, which he stretches cruciformly. His partner, Dr Jen Gardner *(far left)* is a tad gothic. Both are nerdy yeast experts. Their business partner is winemaker Nic Bourke *(far right)*. Together they are Some Young Punks, whose delicious wines are labelled in classic, original pulp-fiction covers and drawn-to-order cartoons.

The trio have also rekindled some pre-industrial love in their winemaking, done largely by Bourke at a contracting winery in McLaren Vale. They buy select parcels from other districts, generally use wild yeasts, and leave the wines on skins much longer than the norm. After all that study, McBride and Gardner admit they can't work out exactly what wild yeasts do, but they know enough to appreciate the advantages over factory yeasts, and that each vineyard has its own indigenous culture giving unique aromas and flavours.

Their 2009 Clare Riesling – Monsters, Monsters Attack – clocks in at 28 grams per litre of residual sugar, much more than seems apparent in its alluring, complex form. The reds are big, lush, adventurous... and much more serious than their labels.

Natasha Mooney
Adelaide Hills and Barossa

Natasha Mooney *(below, left)*, known to all as Tash, says the key to her winemaking soul is her preference for wines from Italy and Burgundy. She made wine at Penfolds, Lindemans and Barossa Valley Estate before establishing Fox Gordon with some mates. She also makes wine for others, like the Amadio family, whose frontline vineyard near Mt Crawford in the Adelaide Hills supplies her with some of the newly introduced varieties she is quickly mastering.

Like the best of her groundbreaking colleagues, Mooney keeps one foot grounded firmly in the past: she loves working with old Barossa grapegrowing families whose generations of experience with more traditional varieties – Shiraz, Grenache, Mourvedre and Cabernet Sauvignon – provides the foundations for forays into the likes of Arneis, Aglianico, Sagrantino, Sangiovese, Tempranillo and Zinfandel. 'It's a hard sell, so far, with these alternatives,' she says. 'It's difficult to tell how much the market can absorb. It's a big learning curve for the drinker, as much as the retailer.'

While she's made 'easy-drinking fruit bombs' from the new types thus far, Mooney's major wines are staunch, yet sensual, reflecting that rare gastronomic intelligence that the industrialised wine world seems to have forgotten. 'We'll make more serious wines from these new varieties as I learn more about them,' she says. 'In the meantime, profit is still Shiraz-driven!'

There are many exquisite creations still to come from this uncommonly bright, tenacious, eternally curious wine lover.

McLean's Farm, Barossa

Bob and Wilma McLean went through the roof of the wine business – he was the first modern PR marketeer at Orlando in the late '70s, then Petaluma marketing boss in the days of its ascendancy, thence to shareholder/general manager at St Hallett, where he cashed out when it was floated and absorbed (and promptly absorbed by somebody else). The McLeans spent that loot on a high, rocky farm atop Mengler's Hill, overlooking the Barossa. Since the beginning of the South Australian colony, no one had been mad enough to plant anything there. But the McLeans were.

They planted 6,144 untrellised bush vines in 500-million-year-old sandstone. Without water. Shiraz, Grenache, Mourvedre and Riesling. Big Bob talks about the importance of the soil, but I've been there: there's no soil. The porous sandstone holds just enough rain to keep the vines alive. And now, after six years, they're growing enough fruit to make wine.

While the McLeans buy grapes from their downhill neighbours to give visitors something beautiful to drink, the initial wines from this crazy scheme are simply stunning. Nascent but stunning. McLean's Farm has set a new ceiling for vinous adventure and wild, inspired playing of the cards. High stakes, yes, but very, very cool.

Old Mill Estate & Beach Road, Langhorne Creek

Peter and Vicki Widdop became vignerons when a mighty flood washed their lucerne farm into the River Murray estuary. Unwilling to take the risk itself, a Barossa winery convinced them to plant Touriga Nacional. After several years of good business, the winery then dropped the Widdops' contract, leaving them a vineyard full of ripening grapes.

To feed the hungry bank, the Widdops created a brand named after their defunct mill, and engaged Simon Parker to turn their Port grapes into rosé. By the time they realised the market's sluggishness to accept the new, they had three vintages of rosé with more mouthfeel, complexity, depth and ageability than it normally has.

Australians are slowly realising this wine style suits the blistering climate and seafood cuisine better than 16% Shiraz. And now, with the help of John Glaetzer, the ex-Wolf Blass guru, Old Mill is perfecting a full-bodied dry red from the same grape. With uncanny serendipity, its popularity is leading curious drinkers into the easier wonders of the rosé.

Meanwhile, across the same estuarine flats, ex-Rosemount winemaker Briony Hoare *(above)* discovered some modest plantings of Arneis and Greco di Tufo (a Campania variety never before planted in Australia). She immediately made two of the most radical, fragrant, entertaining whites I've seen lurch unheralded onto the shelves. They are available, with lovely McLaren Vale reds, under Hoare's new Beach Road brand. I envisage a happier flood than the one that pushed the Widdops into the wine lake.

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