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Women of wine

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While Australian female winemakers are not in the majority in the industry, they are leading the way in innovation and sustainability.

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Virginia Willcock stands in a sunny vineyard. It's late spring and the air is still and warm. "Don't worry," says the award-winning Vasse Felix Chief Winemaker, "there will be a breeze soon." As if by clockwork a cooling breeze blows in from the Indian Ocean and the vines dance gently about.

Willcock is one of the most respected winemakers in Australia leading a vanguard of progressive thinkers who work with the soil and vines to grow fruit perfect for low intervention winemaking. The end product speaks volumes about the *terroir* of the Margaret River region in the southwest of Western Australia. That Willcock was named Winemaker of the Year in the Australian Women in Wine Awards in London in 2017 is an equally loud endorsement of her vision and intuition. She learned about vines and wines growing up with winemaking parents on a hobby farm north of Perth. The four vineyards she now makes wine from cover 260 hectares.

"Margaret River is a bloody unique place," says Willcock, her passion for the region 300km south Perth bubbling over in Aussie slang.

"We're on ancient soils that are lean and mean. The winters are cool and mild and that breeze off the Indian Ocean is the largest air conditioner in the world," she says. This relaxed Mediterranean-style climate allows the fruit to ripen gradually to accumulate high levels of flavour without the high levels of sugar that would end up being bigger, more alcoholic wines. Instead, Willcock's Vasse Felix white wines are noted for their clean and discernable freshness and distinct fruit characteristics.

Sustainable farming, healthy vines

Willcock's strategies to achieve perfect fruit include vineyard practices that for all intents and purposes are organic, although Vasse Felix is not officially certified. "We use sustainable, biological farming to promote soil microbiology that in turn supports healthy vines," she says. This is backed by gentle handling of the fruit in the winery.

"If the fruit is pristine, which it almost always is," says Willcock, "then all I have to do is guide the process along." Fermentation starts with naturally occurring yeasts, indigenous to the vineyards. "What we do here is about whole berry ferment that is long and," says Willcock, "in the case of our cabernet sauvignon, 35 days on skin to extract that colour and tannin." As the breeze picks up the native forest on the verge of the

vineyard begins to rustle and a pair of dragonflies dart between the vines. “That’s a good sign of a healthy environment,” says Willcock with a broad smile.

Another winner at the 2017 prestigious Australian Women in Wine Awards was Sue Hodder from Wynns Coonawarra Estate in the southeast of South Australia. This year, she also celebrates a quarter of century working at the historic vineyards and winery that covers a large part of the coveted *terra rossa* soil (red soil), a thin strip of red clay over limestone. Vines were first planted here in the 1890s and developed into a thriving business by Melbourne wine merchant brothers Samuel and David Wynn in 1951. The iron-rich red soil has a profound influence on the grapes grown here.

Wynns is known for its cabernet sauvignon, particularly the Black Label that is made from the top 20 per cent of the fruit from the estate and sees aromas of blackberry, dark cherry and black olive nuanced by touches of liquorice, violets and tobacco.

What Wynns’ reds are best known for are their ageability. “We recently celebrated 60 Years of Wynns tastings with a comprehensive tasting here in Coonawarra and tastings in London, Hong Kong, New York and San Francisco,” says Hodder with a touch of pride in her voice.

Innovation essential in a changing world

“It was remarkable to be part of that but also to see that continuous thread of winemaking from this unique region.”

While Hodder acknowledges the weight of the history of a business like Wynns she has an eye on the future working with research scientists to create innovation in the vineyard and winery to help cope with a changing world.

“Water is a big issue in the wine industry around the world and we are seeing droughts when we wouldn’t normally see them,” she explains. “So we are learning ways to use water only at the exact time to get the best out of the fruit and preserve our allocation of water.”

When we spoke she had just finished visiting vineyards in South America as part of an ongoing exchange of ideas about growing grapes and making wine in the 21st century.

Hodder and Willcock have helped shape Wynns Coonawarra Estate and Vasse Felix into two of the world’s great wine domains, capable of matching it with the best. In 2017, Vasse Felix was named ‘New World Winery of the Year’ by leading USA publication *Wine Enthusiast* in its 18th annual Wine Star Awards, an award Penfolds took out in 2013.

The release last year of the 2015 60th Vintage Black Label Cabernet Sauvignon by Wynns was not the only major Australian wine milestone celebrated under the steering hand of a female winemaker. 2017 also saw Vasse Felix celebrate its 50th birthday, validating the decision of its founder Dr Thomas Cullity to plant vines on an old farm nearly 300km south of Perth in 1967. “It is that weight of history that drives you on,” Says Willcock. “To be the best. I never wanted to be a great female winemaker. Only a great winemaker.”

A philosophy that resonates with, and inspires, the next generation.

Find out more about [Vasse Felix](#) and [Wynns Coonawarra Estate](#).
