

Cellar cleansers

Winemakers are proving a dab hand at brewing beer, writes *Max Allen*

PHOTOGRAPHY MATTHEW NEWTON

ASHLEY HUNTINGTON CAN REMEMBER exactly when his heart started drifting from wine to beer. In 2003 he was the winemaker at La Baume in the south of France. Hardys, the winery's Australian owners, were making noises about closing the operation. Huntington could see the writing on the wall. "I'd always intended to come home to Tasmania and plant a vineyard," he says. "But it was clear the Australian wine

New breed: "We're applying small-winemaker thinking to beer," says Ashley Huntington

industry was going through some significant changes, with oversupply, too many wineries and the like. Beer smelled like more of an opportunity to me: there were very few craft breweries in Tassie back then. So I started poring over beer-making manuals, the passion welling in my gut. And once that feeling gets on the hop, it's pretty hard to quell."

Six years later, Ashley and Jane Huntington's Two Metre Tall operation, on the Derwent River north of Hobart, is one of the most exciting small brewing companies in the country. As well as growing most of their own barley and hops and producing particularly flavour-some and complex brews, they take the distribution of their products to a unique extreme by installing proper, old-fashioned hand pumps in pubs and bars that want to serve kegs of Two Metre Tall beers in the best possible condition.

"Really, what we're doing is applying small-winemaker thinking to beer," Huntington says. "We grow the raw materials ourselves on our farm, we turn those raw materials into beer and we sell it the way we want to. Seems natural to us as winemakers. But it's extremely unusual in the beer world."

Australia's craft beer movement has really gathered momentum in the past decade or so. There are now around 85 small breweries across the country, producing a staggering array of beer styles. And some of the best are produced by winemakers like the Huntingtons. Microbreweries keep popping up in – or near – wineries. You'll find the Barossa



Terroir: Two Metre Tall grows its own raw materials – which is "extremely unusual in the beer world", says Huntington

Valley Brewing company within the splendour of Chateau Yaldara in the Barossa; Duckstein Brewery housed at the Saracen Estates cellar door in Margaret River; the seriously stylish Moo Brew operation next to the Moorilla Estate winery outside Hobart; while visitors to Knappstein winery in Clare now walk through the tiny onsite brewery to get to the cellar door – where the fabulous Reserve Lager is available on tap. A sizeable brewery at De Bortoli's huge winery just outside Griffith produces a terrifi-

"It's like wine: I want to make beers that have a real regional significance"

cally flavoursome pilsner called Red Angus; and Victoria's newest brewery, White Rabbit, has opened across the car park from the bustling Innocent Bystander cellar door in the Yarra Valley.

These breweries not only tap in (sorry) to the steady tourist trade in a wine region, but also find a ready and thirsty market among local winemakers, especially during vintage time. As Red Angus brewer Neal Cameron jokingly puts it: "For every litre of wine that gets produced, three litres of beer are con-

Tasting notes



Moo Brew Pale Ale, Derwent Valley

The microbrewery at Moorilla Estate produces a sensational selection of full-flavoured beers such as a deep dark ale, a golden pilsner and this super-perfumed pale ale, all packaged in distinctive skittle bottles with striking abstract labels. www.moobrew.com.au



Bridge Road Chestnut Lager, Beechworth

You will be unsurprised to learn that this beer has a nutty character – a deliciously dense, savoury quality underneath the usual hoppy fragrance and gently bitter finish. Unusual but really worth trying if you're feeling adventurous. www.bridgeroadbrewers.com.au



Knappstein Reserve Lager, Clare Valley

Says winemaker Julian Langworthy: "I have fresh beer on tap just a metre and a half from my desk. I reckon I've put on a kilo a month since I started here." It's no wonder: this lager, with its gorgeous, sauvignon-like perfume, is one of the country's best. www.knappstein.com.au



Red Angus Pilsner, Riverina

With a lagering – or maturation – period of three to four weeks before bottling, this pilsner has a little more character and complexity than most other lagers, while retaining its crisp, refreshing quality. www.williambull.com.au

sumed by the winemakers. So Darren De Bortoli decided that if that's the case, then it might as well be our own."

Plenty of other wine folk have turned their hand to brewing. The Bryans family's Avonmore Estate vineyard north of Bendigo is surrounded by fields of barley, some of which is turned into a deliciously bitter, English-style ale under the estate label; Otway Estate winery in southwest Victoria has diversified into beer production under the memorable Prickly Moses label; and Claudio Radenti, renowned winemaker at Freycinet Vineyard on Tasmania's east coast, has been producing his own splendid, cloudy Hazards Ale for years.

As well as giving winemakers something to do with their hands during the nine months of the year when they're not picking, crushing and pressing grapes, brewing their own is also a way to ensure they – and the growing legion of craft beer aficionados – have a supply of really tasty, interesting things to drink.

That's why Ben Kraus set up his own brewery, Bridge Road, in his home town of Beechworth in 2004. After training as a winemaker, Kraus returned from working three vintages in Europe – drinking lots of great ales along the way – to a distinct lack of beer choice in his local bottleshop, and no craft brewery in the area.

Like the Huntingtons, Kraus's background in wine makes him a particularly adventurous brewer: as well as a range of classic French and Belgian bottle-conditioned ales, he has developed

his own Chestnut Lager, using an ingredient that grows particularly well in Victoria's northeast.

"I add about 20 per cent milled chestnuts to the mash with the barley," says Kraus. "I wanted to make a beer that has a point of difference, that uses local produce. I'm also working on a single-hop India Pale Ale, using a strain of hops developed at the local Rostrevor research station. It's like wine: I want to make beers that have a real regional significance."

All these winemaker-made beers are about as far as it's possible to get from the bland, fizzy stuff on tap in almost every pub. And that's the whole point.

"When you think about it, beer is a singular word in this country," says Ashley Huntington. "There's a sameness to the beer produced by the big industrial brewers who dominate the industry. It's monotonous, monocultural. But the blandness is driven by the brewers and their marketing machines and the trade, not the punter. It never ceases to amaze me how, when you give people real beer, with real character, they absolutely love it. It makes you realise there's so much scope in beer, so much work still to be done. It's crackingly exciting."

Says Ben Kraus: "The craft beer scene is like the wine industry was 15 years ago. All these new producers starting up, full of enthusiasm. At some time in the near future there'll be an oversupply of micro-breweries, I'm sure, like we've seen an oversupply of wineries. But in the meantime it's a good ride to be on."



Avonmore Estate Organic Ale, Bendigo

With a burnished copper colour, lots of hoppy aromatics and a properly bitter finish, this tastes like the kind of real ale you'd find in a pub down some winding British country lane. Drink with a ploughman's platter. www.avonmoreestatewine.com



Two Metre Tall Derwent Clear Ale, Derwent Valley

My favourite Two Metre Tall beer is the hoppy, copper-coloured Cleansing Ale (because of its name, really – I'm surprised no one has called a beer Cleansing Ale before). But at this time of year, the cool, wheaty refreshment of the Clear Ale is probably going to go down better with fish and chips on the beach. www.2mt.com.au

House cider rules

It's not just hops and barley that they're experimenting with; now it's apples, too

A SURPRISING NUMBER OF AUSTRALIAN GRAPETREEDERS are also jumping on the cider press. Winemaker Adam Marks makes good Normandy-style ciders at Bress vineyard in Harcourt, central Victoria's apple capital; in the Yarra Valley, Punt Road winemaker Kate Goodman produced her first batch of cider in 2008; in WA, Mountford vineyard in Pemberton produces a medium-dry cider called Tangletoe; and winemaker Warwick Billings left the large Angove winery in the Riverland a couple of years ago to concentrate on his boutique Adelaide Hills cider label, Lobo. Amulet winery in Beechworth produces a cider, as do Ben Krauss at Bridge Road, Otway Estate in southwest Victoria and winemaker Phil Kelly at Coldstream Brewery in the Yarra Valley.

Unlike the craft beer scene, though, where Australian brewers have access to excellent raw materials from locally grown exotic hops to imported malts, or the wine industry, where grape growers have

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hundreds of different varieties and clones to choose from, Australia's cider makers are seriously hampered by the lack of supply of proper cider apple varieties, which are much sharper, more perfumed and more bitter-tasting than everyday apples. It's a bit like trying to launch a boutique wine industry and only giving growers sultana vines to work with: no matter how hard you try, a cider made from Pink Lady juice is never going to taste very interesting.

But this is changing. There are in fact plenty of cider apple varieties in Australia – a tree here, a tree there, hidden away in collections and planted in a couple of orchards. It's only a matter of time before cuttings are taken and more trees propagated.

The interest is certainly there. When I spoke to him, Ashley Huntington had just fermented his first batch of cider from Sturmer apples, an old English cider variety he stumbled across in an orchard in the Huon Valley. And Neal Cameron of Red Angus has plans to source some proper cider apples this year to produce "a true, lumpy, floral, seven per cent alcohol cider with lovely acidity".

I don't know about you, but I can't wait.

Max Allen

