

# Getting the knack of pét-nat

For the first time, the *Wine & Viticulture Journal* tasted Australian sparkling wines made according to the pétillant naturel or méthode ancestrale style of winemaking. The overall quality of the wines somewhat surprised our judging panel (see results page 82), with them agreeing the following wines stood out the most. We asked their producers to briefly share their pet nat journey as well as the production practices behind the winning wines.



**TIM WILDMAN**  
OWNER  
WILDMAN WINE



**2020 ASTRO  
BUNNY PÉT-NAT**  
(RRP\$38.00/BOTTLE)

The volumes grew organically, doubling every year. After four years I decided it was time to start working with distributors and also to export, so in 2017 I tripled production in one go, from 4000 bottles to just under 13,000. Since then we've kept growing every year, with 2020 being our largest year with just over 16 tonnes of fruit and 15,000 bottles. Although tiny by normal wine industry standards, this actually makes us the largest pét-nat producer in Australia by quite a long way, and one of the largest in the world.

Mediterranean varieties from the Riverland. Unfortunately, the grower's prices kept going up while the quality went the other way, so in 2019 I made a massive leap of faith and moved my entire vineyard sourcing. The plan was to source similar varieties but from premium regions that specialised in them. For the last two vintages we've worked with a grower in McLaren Vale for the Nero d'Avola, a grower in the Adelaide Hills for the Fiano, and in 2020 due to low crop volumes, we took some Arneis, also from the Hills. The old vine Zibibbo still comes from the Riverland, but I moved to a better grower.

All the fruit is hand-picked. I insist on that. I'm always there at dawn with the picking crews, personally supervising the pick and giving instructions. In challenging years I reckon this can gain us an extra 10% in quality simply by careful selection during the pick, so why wouldn't you.

The Fiano from Amadio Vineyard at Kersbrook in the Adelaide Hills was planted in 1985 on gravel loam over clay. The Nero d'Avola from Sue Trott in the McLaren Flat sub-district of McLaren Vale was planted in 2011 on sand over clay. The Zibibbo from Chris Byrne's Gums and Roses vineyard in Loxton in the Riverland was planted in 1953 on red sand over limestone. The Arneis from Yacca Paddock in Kuitpo in the Adelaide Hills was planted in 2000 on sandy loam over clay limestone.

## WINEMAKING

All the fruit is handpicked. The Zibibbo gets 24 hours of skin contact, the Nero spends a few hours in the press; all the varieties are then co-fermented. We try and chill the must before the fermentation starts to rack off heavy sediments, but we aren't always successful.

## SOME BACKGROUND

In September 2013 I left the UK to fulfil a long-held dream of spending a summer living by the beach in McLaren Vale. That first vintage, in 2014, was a bit of a fluke really. I made the wine as a bet, I hand-picked one tonne of McLaren Vale Grenache with a couple of mates and made my first 600 bottles of pét-nat at Yangarra which was also experimenting with the style for the first time that year.

I chose to make pét-nat because I loved the style of the French and Italian versions I'd been drinking back in the UK, but I also wanted to show it was possible to make a wine with zero sulfur that could be fruity, fault free and delicious. There was a lot more scepticism and outright cynicism of the natural wine scene in Australia back then and I guess I wanted to prove a point.

At the time there were exactly five producers in Australia making pét-nat, now there must be over 200. I'm not a trained winemaker but I knew enough about pét-nat to make me the one-eyed man in the land of the blind. So, we experimented, made a lot of mistakes over those first few years and learned the art of making pét-nat.

## VITICULTURE

2020 was our seventh vintage and there's been a constant evolution in the fruit sourcing and winemaking over those years, always with a view to increasing quality. That first 2014 vintage was a one-off using McLaren Vale Grenache, but ever since 2015 I've used a variation of 50% Fiano (or Vermentino), 25% Nero d'Avola and 25% Zibibbo (aka Muscat of Alexandria aka Gordo).

I came up with that blend on the back of an envelope before the 2015 harvest and amazingly it worked first time. The Fiano is early picked and just gives acid and neutrality, which I think is really important. Fifty per cent of the wine is a white, flavourless canvas, which I think contributes a lot to the wine's non-vinous, watermelon-like drinkability.

The Nero gives colour, which always starts off pink at bottling, but because there's no sulfur the colour drops out and turns into that distinctive carrot juice orange that the Astro Bunny is known for. The Zibibbo gives aromatics and flavour in that classic Muscat style, but because the wine is orange-coloured people don't think 'floral' they tend to think 'peachy', which works.

From 2015 to 2018 I sourced my

Wild yeasts are used, but no enzymes or fining agents.

Towards the end of fermentation we chill it right down to slow the ferment and achieve tartrate stability. We aim to bottle at around 12g/L of residual sugar. The wine completes its fermentation in the bottle over the winter resulting in a final pressure of 3 bar. This gives the wine a gentle, creamy foam, rather than an aggressive fizz, which I think suits the pét-nat style.

In the early years we made all the usual mistakes; the first vintage had huge tartrate slabs which resulted in extreme gushing and we had to hand disgorge all 600 bottles. For the second vintage in 2015 I bottled the 1500 bottles by hand on my own; this took about 24 hours and during that time about half the remaining sugar ticked away, so we ended up with the second half of the bottling run being not that fizzy.

Over the years we've learnt and refined the process. A major breakthrough in 2017 was moving from hand bottling to a bottling line, which allowed us to increase volumes. I've learnt that the art of pét-nat making is all about timing, temperature and turbidity.

## MARKETING

For the first three years I sold every bottle myself direct to the trade. Initially, this was just in South Australia, then as volumes grew I started making trips to Sydney and Melbourne. This involved a fair amount of sleeping on couches, lugging a backpack of heavy samples around, wearing out the shoe leather, taking the rejections. I'm a great believer that this is the only way to start and establish a

brand. You've got to be out there in the early days telling the story yourself, sharing the journey of discovery with your customers, making friends, allies and ambassadors, and crucially getting feedback direct from the trade. That feedback from consumers and trade has been a massive help in steering the style and packaging developments over the years. In 2017 I started working with two distributors in Australia and in 2018 started exporting to seven countries.

I've always placed a big emphasis on packaging. The front label has always featured the artwork of the Astro Bunny character and nothing else; all the text is on the back label. The front label is there to evoke an emotion in the consumer; we're all emotional buyers. I've also invested a lot in bespoke six-pack cartons which are printed on all sides with artwork, images and quotes. Having worked in both the on and off premise trade myself, I know that the very first interaction with your brand is when a member of staff takes in the delivery — so why not make that a positive impact through branding your carton?

Instagram has been a significant driver in building the brand, both within Australia and internationally. In the early days when I was still selling direct, Instagram led to me opening new accounts and sales in states I couldn't get to like Queensland and Tasmania. I don't actually have a dedicated Instagram page for the wine itself, people have to do a bit of digging and find the connection to my own personal Instagram page if they want to tag me; or they can just hashtag the name of the wine or pét-nat and I'll see their posts that way. Apart from during vintage I don't add

any content to Instagram during the year, I let my distributors and their consumers drive the content. They upload their own pictures and stories, which I then share and add to my own story roll. This makes the social media content very organic, grass roots and ground up. Nothing too slick or planned, which feels right for a natural wine brand.

I'm in the lucky position that the wine sells out immediately on allocation every year, which allows me to keep the price firm and means I don't have to get involved with seeking third party endorsements through the press, points or shows. The best endorsement is from your consumers, that's the only one that really matters.

In terms of future developments, we released magnums this year for the first time, which has been met with a lot of enthusiasm. My focus over the next few years is to try and move all our fruit to organic or biodynamically certified vineyards. This will either be through encouraging and helping our existing growers to make the jump (most are very close anyway) or bringing on new growers with certified vineyards. I think certification does matter, if only to prove that you're not greenwashing your story, something that is all too common across the industry these days.

I also hope to expand to a few more export markets, such as South Korea where there's a really vibrant natural wine scene among younger consumers. But I don't want to go crazy in expansion, or take allocations away from existing markets. We're shooting for 20,000 bottles next year, which is plenty big enough, and makes me pretty proud of what started out as a bet and 600 bottles in 2014.

# winetitles classifieds

the marketplace for...

**Your grapes, clean skins,  
and bulk wine exchange**

Now there's an industry site for grape growers and wineries to buy and sell wine grapes and place bulk wine.

**Place listings** – grapes, bulk wine and clean skins

**Describe** – variety, location and tonnes of grapes

**Nominate** – variety and litres of bulk wine

**Find** – buyers for grapes, clean skins, and bulk wine



**Introductory offer - FREE today online or call (08) 8369 9500**

Find your grapes & bulk wine on [www.winetitlesclassifieds.com.au](http://www.winetitlesclassifieds.com.au)

created & managed by winetitles media  
WINE INDUSTRY SOLUTIONS



**JAMES LANCE**  
WINEMAKER, PUNCH  
YARRA VALLEY, VIC



**2017 FRIENDS OF  
PUNCH RURALE**  
(RRP\$32.00/BOTTLE)

### SOME BACKGROUND

My first pét-nat was the 2012 vintage Rurale, made from Chardonnay grapes from Beechworth. I was intrigued and excited to try making this style of sparkling after hearing about the Sutton Grange 2011 Ancestrale. Our first vintage was released without disgorgement. Even though I was very happy with the wine, I thought I would prefer it with less solids in the bottle. As a consequence we have riddled and disgorged each vintage since, giving the wines at least two winters on lees first to ensure they have significant autolysis character.

Since 2014 we have been sourcing our Rurale fruit from Rising Vineyard, 4km from our estate vineyard.

### VITICULTURE

Our Rurale fruit is grown at Rising Vineyard at St Andrews, in the Shire of Nillumbik, in the Yarra Valley. The basis of the wine comes from a small block of Savagnin (the 'not Albarino' clone!). We then use some of the clone 95 Chardonnay from the same vineyard to add extra palate weight and complexity to the blend.

Both the Savagnin and Chardonnay are hand cane pruned and have bilateral canes on a single fruiting wire; they are VSP trained.

The soils in the vineyard are degraded Devonian Siltstone — a shallow (40-60cm) clay loam on fissured sedimentary rock.

### WINEMAKING

All fruit is hand harvested. The Savagnin and Chardonnay are harvested at the same time, then transported the 4km to our winery. Depending on picking timing, the fruit is either pressed immediately or stored in a cool room overnight. We whole bunch press the combined varieties to tank, with 40mg/L SO<sub>2</sub> added to prevent oxidation and delay fermentation. The juice is settled for two to three days, then cloudy juice is racked to another tank ready for fermentation to begin; heavy solids are disgarded.

Natural fermentation is temperature controlled to approximately 20°C until fermentation is close to bottling residual sugar. Then the temperature is reduced to about 17°C. We bottle when the residual sugar is 21-22g/L. The bottles are lightweight sparkling bottles and closed with crown seals. The bottled wine is then stacked into fruit bins for bottle fermentation and stored at about 20°C.

Ideally, fermentation goes to completion, but the 2017 vintage finished with approximately 6g/L of residual sugar. I am happy with the palate balance of this residual sugar given the high acidity of the 2017 vintage.

The wine was stored for 40 months on lees then transported to Kilchurn Winery for riddling and disgorgement. Due to the low

intervention winemaking, there is always some tartrate present in the bottles. The bottles were shaken before loading into riddling cages to break the tartrate into small enough pieces to disgorge. However, many bottles retained a small amount of tartrate. During disgorgement there was no dosage added, and just a small addition of 15mg/L of SO<sub>2</sub> to control oxidation and aldehydes. The bottles were closed with crown seals, washed, and returned to our winery, labelled and packed into boxes.

### MARKETING

I have always enjoyed having sparkling wines in our range as I love to share and drink them! Since discovering pét-nats this has become my preferred sparkling to make as I love the purity, honesty, and low SO<sub>2</sub> of the style.

We have two ranges of wine — Punch is made from estate-grown fruit, Friends of Punch from fruit from local growers. Friends of Punch allows us to make varieties and styles that we don't grow ourselves, and also to have larger quantities as our estate vineyard is so small and low yielding.

Our Rurale is popular with many restaurants, bars and retailers in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. We do not currently export any of our Friends of Punch range including Rurale.



Pét-nat wines stacked in fruit bins for bottle fermentation at Punch wine company in Victoria's Yarra Valley.



**AJ HOADLEY**  
OWNER AND WINEMAKER  
LA VIOLETTA  
GREAT SOUTHERN, WA



**2020 SPUNK NAT**  
(RRP\$37.00/BOTTLE)

**SOME BACKGROUND**

Spunk Nat was the first pét-nat I made back in 2014. Back then my good mate Andries Mostert from Brave New Wines was talking up pét-nats. I told him he was a try-hard trendy and I, for one, would have nothing to do with them.

A few days later I was playing about with blends for some experimental carboy ferments I had for a 'crunchy carbonic red' project. They were still sweet but looked great with 50% Riesling in the mix. They tested at about 0.2 Baume and I thought that if I bottled them that night I wouldn't have to worry about them anymore. So, I did about 350 bottles using a syphon hose that took forever, then forgot about them until July when I cracked a tester for breakfast. It squirted all over me and I was hooked on the slapstick hilarity of pét-nats.

**VITICULTURE**

The Riesling and Shiraz come from a vineyard west of Mt Barker, near the top of a south-facing, gravelly loam slope with an

altitude of around 200m. Both varieties are on two-bud spur-pruned VSP trellising and crop at about 6-8 tonnes per hectare.

The Riesling is machine harvested into picking bins for cool skin contact and then transported to the winery in Denmark. The Shiraz typically comes in a couple of weeks later.

**WINEMAKING**

The Riesling typically sits on skins for 10-12 hours before going into the press then, sequentially, to tank, puncheons and barriques to get a range of different cuts. The tank does a rough cold settle before racking, then will sit until wild fermentation kicks off. During the ferment I will add various barrels to bring in other textures or aromatics.

The Shiraz is typically hand-picked and foot-stomped before going into several small fermenters, drained off after a few days on skins, then added over the top to the Riesling ferment.

This is the 'funnest' part for me, watching the ferment turn from white into pink while laughing maniacally. There's the right amount of Shiraz in the blend when it starts to smell like new season strawberries. The style has metamorphosed over the years as I've tried out more or less skin contact, but I really like where it sits now with the majority Riesling in the blend giving a lighter, fresher expression.

Great Southern Riesling is the key, with a fine citrus line from the natural acidity.

Bottling takes place at sub zero 'on the stick' with around 15-20g/L of residual sugar. The wine needs a few months on lees in bottle to settle into itself and always throws big long tartrates, so needs a shakedown before settling and disgorging. I could try to make it without popping the plugs but I like the wine better that way — it's brighter and freshens the aromatics. And it looks so pretty.

**MARKETING**

The label design is a celebration of the Gill Sans font, famously used for the London Underground sign and the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' poster, among other things. The 'Relax and enjoy the bubbles' advisory on the back label is an extrapolation of that. I think it's some of my best work.

Production is a few hundred cases and the wine is released on allocation through state distributors. As much as people enjoy posting photos of themselves licking bottles on instagram, 'Spunk' is in fact an archaic Scottish term for a tinderstick, the idea being that it's a beaut wine to get the party started. And a fairly poor pun on 'spunk rat'.

Campbell Mattinson said it best on Winefront: "Wine itself sounds great. But that label and name ... not for me, not in a million years."

**SOME BACKGROUND**

Patio Nat was the third pét-nat I made after Spunk Nat and Frank Nat (a Chenin Blanc/Cabernet Franc blend). The idea was to subvert the industrial fizzy Moscato paradigm with something wild, free and unfiltered. It seemed like a drongo idea at the time, but it worked out okay. Muscat has a deep and ancient power.

**VITICULTURE**

The fruit comes from a single vineyard in the Ferguson Valley area of Geographe. The vines are on a south-east facing slope that sits at an altitude of around 350m, so it holds good acidity. The variety is Muscat a Petits Grains Noir which is grown on a two-bud

spur-pruned VSP trellis and crops at 6-8 tonnes per hectare. The fruit is hand harvested and transported to the winery in Denmark.

Picking is based primarily on acidity. If the juice makes me wince and stamp my foot then it's in the zone. We don't add any acid in the winery so we need to capture it in the vineyard. Flavour ripeness will vary from year to year but it's always going to be good because it's a good site.

**WINEMAKING**

The Muscat is de-stemmed into the press for overnight skin contact with no additions, then pressed sequentially, first to tank, then puncheons and barriques. Later, fractions

are more likely to be racked off heavy solids. Typically, a barrel will kick off wild fermentation first and can be used as a starter for the tank if it's smelling a bit ethyl. The wild ferment typically ticks out slowly (could be six weeks), so it's pretty hairy sending it to bottle, but it seems to get there in the end. The good thing about the long, slow finish is it allows heavy lees to drop out.

I usually rack it a couple of times before bottling; this helps pick up some oxygen to keep the ferment happy.

The sugar at bottling depends on the



**2020 PATIO NAT**  
(RRP\$37.00/BOTTLE)

overall fruit weight of the wine, the acidity and how strong and steady the ferment is looking — you want it to chew enough so it's good and fizzy. It's sub zero on the stick when it goes to bottle. I resist mono-varietalism so I like to throw in a couple of buckets of Riesling before bottling. Riesling makes everything better!

Phenolic ripeness will have some influence on how badly I sleep while the wine is sitting on skins. It's a fizzy wine so I think it's important to retain delicacy and balance; there's plenty to worry about. Juice oxidation will round out a lot of the phenolics, but if we lock in too much bitterness it could throw out the balance. At the same time, we should end up with a few grams of residual sugar at the end of the wild ferment, so we need some phenolics in there to balance that.

The wine changes nicely with time on lees, but I release it early so people can experience it with that full fermenty, fresh, federweisser vibe. Also, we need pét-nats in late autumn and winter — when you get those beautiful sunny days when you need to celebrate life. I did a vertical tasting last Christmas of the



The Ferguson Valley vineyard from which the fruit is sourced for the Patio Nat.

2017, 2018 and 2019. They're ageing really well; still nice and fresh.

#### MARKETING

I only make a few hundred cases of this wine so it is released on allocation. It seems

to have a strong following which has built by word of mouth and a few lazy instagram posts (@laviolettawines). People often tell me it has led them or their friends or relatives into enjoying wine or trying new wines outside the box. No bull — that is truly heart-warming.



**SAM SCOTT**  
WINEMAKER, LA PROVA  
ADELAIDE HILLS, SA

**2020 LA PROVA**  
**BARBERA PÉT-NAT**  
(RRP\$28.00/BOTTLE)

#### SOME BACKGROUND

We made our first pét-nat from Pinot Grigio in 2013. I had run a barrel of juice off the press tray for a high solids, wild ferment, textural component to our Pinot Grigio and then decided that I didn't want to go down that path, so I had a loose end. I had recently drunk a Plageoles Mauzac Nature (methode ancestrale) and it was delicious. So, I decided to have a crack at making one myself.

The Pinot Grigio was labelled as methode ancestrale, was super fun to drink and it grabbed a lot of interest from our distributors. Subsequently, we have made small batches of one to two pét-nats each year, and have used, depending on the vintage, the following

varieties: Aglianico, Montepulciano, Pinot Noir, Cortese and Barbera. In 2020 we made pét-nats from Barbera and Cortese.

#### VITICULTURE

The Barbera for the 2020 was contracted from Brackenwood Vineyard at Hope Forest in the Adelaide Hills. The vineyard has an elevation of 400m and features sandy loam soils dotted with ironstone over a sandstone subsoil where you will find some weathered quartz and a little orange clay loam. It is uncertified biodynamically farmed.

The vines are trellised to a single cordon and yield an average of 8 tonnes per hectare.

#### WINEMAKING

The fruit is hand harvested, chilled overnight and whole bunch pressed to the fermentation tank. There is a 20mg/L addition of SO<sub>2</sub> to the juice at the tank after pressing is complete; and no hard pressings are included. The ferment (eventually) starts naturally and, once cranking, gets some yeast nutrient and a few hours of filtered air.

Once the fermentation reaches

approximately 0.5 Baume the cooling is turned on to slow the ferment with the ultimate aim of holding the wine at 0-1°C with approximately 12-14g/L of residual sugar. The tank is held cold for up to four weeks which precipitates the majority of the tartrate crystals and allows for some settling of lees. The ferment is then racked, warmed, checked for yeast activity and bottled, hopefully at about 10 grams of residual sugar; the bottles are then stored in a warm room for primary fermentation to finish to dryness. The pét-nat is not filtered, riddled or disgorged. It is released around September each year.

The winemaking approach has been fairly consistent from the start but I am open to any refinements that would reduce the cooling/settling time, mainly to reduce refrigeration costs.

#### MARKETING

We market this wine as a fun, small batch part of our range. It is sold nationally through our distributors, with an on-premise focus, and exported to Singapore and Malaysia, also with an on-premise focus.