

Women in wine

writer *Fiona Stocker*

Being a woman and a winemaker can be a useful point of difference, says Fran Austin, owner and winemaker at Delamere Vineyards in partnership with husband Shane Holloway. While some people are cynical about it, she and many other women in the industry accept that it can generate marketing. The Fabulous Women in Wine Society and Women in Wine Awards testify as much.

Some would say it shouldn't really be a talking point. Tasmania has its fair share of women whose wines speak for themselves and transcend any debate about gender. One need look no further than the small patch of ground at Pipers River and Lebrina to the east of the Tamar near Bass Strait, to find stellar (female) names in winemaking, and sparkling wines that rival those of anywhere.

In 2011, Queen Elizabeth II was served four iconic Australian wines at a state dinner in Canberra, and one of those was from Clover Hill, the picturesque winery with the architecturally stunning cellar door.

Who better to talk to about Tasmanian sparkling wines with than the woman who nurtured Clover Hill's reputation for six years,

Karina Dambergs? But rather than weary her intelligence with the gender debate (this is a woman who studied mathematics and theoretical physics between "just for fun" jobs), I'm more interested in quizzing her about what is so special about the breezy eastern Tamar, that it produces wines of world-class distinction.

Dambergs puts it eloquently. Wines of that region have a maritime influence, she believes, speaking of sea-spray and oyster shells and adding a particular complexity and savouriness found nowhere else.

The poetry of her description is paradoxical, for winemaking is an industrial, agricultural pursuit, full of hoses, tanks and automation. And three of the women who have helped shape the East Tamar's reputation are not poets, but scientists.

Karina Dambergs came to sparkling wines via the corporate route with Orlando, and fitted in a vintage season in Champagne with "boutique but very premium" producer Jacquesson. One gets the sense that she researches her mentors thoroughly – the house of Jacquesson was once awarded a medal by Napoleon himself.



In 2006 she became winemaker for Clover Hill in Tasmania and Taltarni in Victoria, both owned by the Goelet family. It was possibly the best fly-in-fly-out role in Australia. Clover Hill had just two wines, a vintage and a blanc de blanc (a sparkling made purely from chardonnay). Dambergs expanded this range, adding a late disgorge with 10 years on lees, a sparkling rose and a non-vintage sparkling. “That’s usually your workhorse,” she says pragmatically of non-vintage wines, which are blended from the fruit of different years to achieve a consistent house style.

On marrying and having a family, Dambergs chose Tasmania and exchanged grapes for apples, establishing Red Brick Road Ciderhouse with partner Corey Baker. She believes the character of the region is just as important in craft cider as in winemaking. And eschewing commercial processes and brewing by hand, eye and palate means she relies more than ever on science. “You need to understand the processes when you’re doing things with yeast and bacteria, and stabilising things in a way you wouldn’t need to if the equipment was doing it for you.”

It’s back to the land of premium sparkling for me. I’m keen to taste the product of this legendary terroir for myself, so I make for Delamere Vineyard to gain Fran Austin’s insights, and sample her fizz.

The 6.5-hectare vineyard perched on a ridge at Pipers River was planted by its original owners on the advice of neighbour Andrew Pirie, no less. It seems fitting that they should now be under Austin’s care – *Gourmet Traveller’s* Young Winemaker of the Year in 2005 and a woman who emanates wisdom about the passion, the industry and the business of winemaking.

*opposite Fran Austin and Shane Holloway
photograph courtesy Delamere Vineyard*

She too was given her career break by the corporate wine world, appointed winemaker and manager at Bay of Fires Winery by Hardy Wine Company in 2001. There she crafted the wines which helped make Bay of Fires an elite name, before leaving to join Shane at Delamere in 2011.

Family ownership of a small business is one of the most common means by which a woman can sustain a career and place in the winemaking industry, Austin believes. With long hours and high pressure during vintage when there’s a narrow window to harvest and press fruit, the industry has a mentality that the flexibility and part-time hours needed for family life cannot be accommodated.

Fran Austin brings a different mindset to the business, believing that women bring capability, a different perspective and much-needed diversity. She and Holloway share roles in the winery equally, and their staff roster includes semi-retired folk, millennials and a professional baritone who works in the winery between stints at the Sydney Opera House.

There is an exceptional opportunity in Tasmania for winemakers, she maintains. While freight across the Bass Strait might make business more costly, there are major advantages, such as a low land price and Tasmania’s reputation as a wine region of great calibre.

Austin has a cool head but big ambitions for Tasmania’s sparkling wine sector. Its collective goal, she believes, should be to build a reputation by creating wines of exceptional quality, marketing them at an appropriately high price point, focussing on their uniqueness, all the while building the Tasmanian brand, bringing investment and growth.

It’s all industry in her winery, where a small team is disgorging – chilling the yeast sediment in the neck of the bottle, carefully removing the cap, extracting the plug with sediment, adding a tiny amount of liqueur, and recorking. This clever

technique for removing the sediment cleanly was invented by Madame Cliquot in the 19th century – she ran the family’s winery after being widowed at 27 by war. She kept her ground-breaking invention a secret for ten years, and the brand still bears her name. Women in wine, it seems, have great form.

Gratifyingly, we end up at the Delamere cellar door, where Austin talks me through tastings of four sparkling wines. The two non-vintage labels are lovely, but it’s the 2014 vintage cuvee, a blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, which bursts onto my palate. There’s a citrus and stone fruit character from the chardonnay, Austin says, and some muskiness from the pinot, but also a brioche bread sweetness.

The blanc de blanc is a revelation too. Six years aging “on lees” gives it delicious complexity and brings out that truly unique sea spray character.

With talent like this, one might think that our winemakers need nothing more than their eye, palate and training, but there’s one woman set to pop the cork on the Tasmanian wine industry with her scientific interventions, and that’s Dr Fiona Kerslake.

After graduating with honours in agricultural science from UTAS, Tasmanian-born Kerslake switched to viticulture after a season in New Zealand snow-boarding and working nights in an upmarket wine-bar in Otago, where the wines piqued her interest. Back home, she did a PhD specialising in the cool climate growing of pinot noir. Since most research was on other varieties and warmer climates, this was research Tasmanian wine houses were ready for, and Kerslake made sure her work had a strong industry focus.

For eight years, she was based at Tamar Ridge in a converted apple cool-store nicknamed “the pilot winery”, with three temperature-controlled rooms and a laboratory.

When it became clear how few analyses there were on sparkling wine, she moved into the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture’s facilities in Launceston, and has established a kind of Hogwarts for sparkling wines.

Her current project examines just how much of the juice emerging from a press is prime quality “free run”, and at exactly what point that begins, incrementally, to change.

In 2017 she was “out at Josef Chromy in the middle of the night”, testing the technology during vintage, with winemakers Jeremy Dineen and Ocky Myburgh watching over her shoulder.

The innovation doesn’t stop there, as it seems Kerslake has the means of changing the game once the wine is in the bottle too. For centuries, winemakers have known that something magic happens to sparkling wine at about the 18-month mark. Kerslake is now developing “treatments” which may speed the rate of maturation and bring the magic forward. This assists boutique wineries that have demand that they cannot satisfy, helping them get wines out of the door and into the glass more quickly. And in an unanticipated flip side, it means that wineries with premium offerings which have been aged for years could bring forward the release of those vintages.

The doctor is playing not just with technology, but with time. Not surprisingly, winemakers the world over are watching keenly, and there is a buzz, Fiona Kerslake says, about the Tasmanian sparkling industry.

With three such effervescent talents in the mix, there is much to drink to, and exceptional wines with which to raise that toast. 🍷

Fiona Stocker is a freelance writer based in the West Tamar. More of her writing can be seen on her Tasmanian food and life blog at appleislandwife.com.