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LIQUID GOLD

Weekend Australian, Australia

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This Hunter Valley winery is known for its buttery chardonnay and passion for art

CAROLINE GLADSTONE

It was mid-2000 in British Columbia, when a woman leading my Canadian tour group smugly dropped the ABC slur: “Anything But Chardonnay.” I was horrified. I love the libation, especially the rich buttery versions that have spent time on oak, and took unspoken umbrage at others who were nodding their agreement.

It wasn’t a new phrase then but one allegedly coined by The New York Times wine columnist, Frank J Prial in 1995. For years I have defended the drop to friends as they quaff their sauvignon blanc. So I was delighted to discover Winmark Wines, a vineyard and cellar door that’s 100 per cent devoted to chardy.

“Nothing But Chardonnay” could be Winmark’s mantra, as it’s the only vineyard in the Hunter Valley, Australia’s oldest wine region, to go down the single-varietal road.

Owned by Danish-born Karin Adcock, who knew nothing about wine when she bought the property in 2016, Winmark (meaning “field of wine”) has had quite the journey. Originally known as Pooles Rock, it was owned for 40 years by former Macquarie Group chairman David Clarke, until his death in 2011.

Energy company AGL bought it from Clarke’s estate and promised its desire for coal seam gas exploration on the site could safely co-exist with viticulture, an idea angry local residents did not accept. Anti-CSG signs sprung up everywhere. When AGL decided to get out of the Hunter, Adcock was lucky to pick up the vineyard for “a bargain”.

“I was surprised when they accepted my offer,” says Karin, who has lived in Australia for 29 years and in a previous career had the distribution rights for Danish jewellery brand Pandora.

“It was years of hard work to bring the vineyard back to where it is now. We pulled out vines as they were in very poor condition. We removed four hectares of verdelho and planted Burgundy-clones of chardonnay. There were already seven hectares of chardonnay vines, root stock that came from France. I knew we were on very good chardonnay soil, which allowed us to bring the vineyard back.”

Today Winmark harvests on average 80 to 100 tonnes of grapes, a huge improvement on the 7.5-tonne yield of Adcock’s first vintage in 2017. Success continued with Winmark named cellar door of the year in 2023 at the Hunter Valley Wine Industry and Legends Awards and shortlisted as the best new winery in the coveted Halliday Wine Companion 2024.

Winmark produces four styles of chardonnay, to appeal to those who may not be overly keen on the wine and others who are serious fans.

Located in Broke, a village with a mere handful of streets, the vineyard is laid out in the shadow of Yellow Rock escarpment, part of the Broken Back Range.

As president of the local tourism association, Adcock helped to establish the Broke Fordwich Wine Trail, comprising 12 cellar doors and attractions, including a distillery, olive growers, guesthouses and an alpaca farm, to entice visitors who would normally stay in Pokolbin, the heart of the Hunter, 18km away.

Adcock converted the 55ha property (11ha are under vine) into a one-stop destination where wines can be swiftly sampled or lingered over with a charcuterie board, and an art lovers’ haunt with an expansive sculpture park and art gallery. Those not wanting to imbibe can grab a coffee and wander among the 23 sculptures.



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I sample the four chardonnays, moving from the lighter two, Rusty's Run 2023 and Winmark Expressions 2022, to the more complex styles that have been fermented in French oak – the Single Reserve 2022 and Icon 72.

"We do get people who don't like chardonnay, so we suggest they give our first two a try, and we get others who love it and have come here on a recommendation," she says.

"A retired banker from France dropped in, bought a glass of Icon and then bought two bottles, while a wine bar owner from Germany, who was travelling the world looking for wines, bought a mixed pallet."

Icon 72 is made from 50-year-old vines planted by original owner David Clarke. "We treat that block with kid gloves. It's hand-picked and the barrels cost \$3500 each. We only make 210 dozen, sometime less, hence the high price (\$95)," she says.

Adcock usually only drinks chardonnay but admits to the occasional pinot noir.

My favourite is Single Vineyard for its extra body. Its label bears a stylised drawing of Poole's Rock, the huge chunk of sandstone on the property in whose hollow slept local rogue and former convict, Richard Poole, in the early 1800s.

Is there a movement back to chardonnay, I ask?

"Yes, it's having a comeback. Today's offerings are more complex and diverse," she says. The chardy backlash, that "ABC" tag, largely stemmed from market saturation (it's the world's fifth most-planted grape) and the dislike of what were once predominantly oaky, buttery styles. I personally love a buttery drop, so Winmark may just hit the mark.

Caroline Gladstone was a guest of Hunter Valley Wine & Tourism Association.

IN THE KNOW

Winmark Wines is at Broke, 168km north of Sydney. It is one of 160 cellar doors in the Hunter Valley, and has four guesthouses that can sleep from two to 14 people; from \$700 for two nights, twin-share (two-night minimum).

winmarkwines.com.au
winecountry.com.au



MORE TO THE STORY

Buttery chardonnays to try.

- DogRidge Butterfingers (McLaren Vale)
- Scarborough Yellow Label (Hunter Valley)
- The Butchers Friend Buttery (Barossa Valley)
- Evans & Tate Butterball (Margaret River)
- Tony Bish Fat & Sassy (Hawkes Bay, NZ)
- Robert Mondavi Vint 2022 Buttery Chardonnay (California)



**Winmark Wines at Broke in
the Hunter Valley**

