



Flametree Wines notches up 10 years of winemaking this year - a fitting milestone for an award-winning drop.

By FERGAL GLEESON.

You need to own a vineyard to make wine, right? It ain't necessarily so and you only have to look at the success of Flametree Wines, which celebrates its 10th birthday this year to prove the point.

Given that milestone, it seemed a good time to catch up with Cliff Royle, winemaker and general manager, to talk about the Flametree story.

"Some would see not having a vineyard as a bad thing but it allows us to 'pick the eyes' of the best subregions of Margaret River. For example we can source sauvignon blanc from Karridale, chardonnay and shiraz from Walcliffe and cabernet from Willyabrup or Yallingup. If you have one vineyard, you are at the mercy of a bad season. We are more fluid. We can pick and choose volumes more easily, based on demand and what consumers are interested in. For example, we are releasing a pinot grigio later this year. From the business side, it is less capital intensive and helps in managing cash flow. We work really closely with about 20 growers, with whom we have long-term contracts. We manage quality through details in the contracts such as specifying maximum yield limits and leaf plucking. We look after our growers and partner with them."

One of the remarkable achievements of Flametree Wines was winning the Jimmy Watson

trophy in 2007 for its inaugural cabernet merlot in 2007. The Jimmy Watson is Australia's most prestigious award for red wine and something that many winemakers covet for their whole lives. Winning it in their first year was outrageous! This win was due to their access to fruit from mature vineyards. It would have been impossible for a winery with young vines.


Cliff has worked hard to deliver value across their three ranges – Embers, Flametree and SRS. His personal pick is the SRS Chardonnay which has enjoyed phenomenal success over the last seven vintages, rating 95 points or more each year with James Halliday and appearing in James Suckling's Top 100 Wines of the World for 2015.

"In general terms, I'd consider our wines in the more elegant spectrum, we're not looking just at power, we want the wines to have a nice line, purity and perfume. We talk a lot about playing to the strengths of the region and harnessing the sub-regional characters within those wines. We like chardonnay to have a tight line of grapefruit, citrus and stone fruits. We generally pick pretty early and end up with whites around 13% alcohol which is low for Margaret River. We pick cabernet more on perfume and tannin ripeness rather than sugar, the fruit flavours must be in the cassis or black fruit spectrum, these are classic cabernet varietal characters and we'd rather be making varietal wines than a specific wine style that's currently in vogue. I like fruit to sing in our wines. You won't see large amounts of oak. We use the best French oak we can get our hands on, however it's only in small amounts as French oak gives wines wonderful structure and complexity."

The cellar door, which channels "modern beach house chic" is conveniently located on Caves Road between Dunsborough and Busselton where you can have a platter and sit by the fire or have a glass of wine on the deck. Vertical tastings and back vintages are also available.

"We've grown from 4,500 cases when I joined in 2009 to 20,000 cases today, but we don't want to increase production further. We'd like to distribute more wine directly through our members and our cellar door. We've got releases of new varieties such as a pinot grigio this year and a malbec next year.

"We also have our family tree wines that we make for our members and cellar door customers. We currently have a Frankland River riesling and a soon to be released grenache for customers wanting to try something a little different.

"If you look at cabernet prices there are now about a dozen Margaret River wineries making cabernet at over \$100 a bottle. There are about half a dozen making chardonnay that is just touching \$100. I think if Margaret River was located where the Hunter Valley is, things would be very different but because of the relative isolation our development has been slower. We taste our wines alongside Bordeaux and Burgundy and they fair very well. There's no doubt the region will continue to grow from strength to strength." 

For more information on Flametree Wines visit flametreewines.com