

DIVINE IN WINE

The Australian wine industry has grown rapidly in the past few decades, as have the skills, knowledge and recognition of our winemakers. Greg Duncan Powell profiles three of the major movers and shakers from the current crop of our emerging viniculturalists.



Recently, the Australian wine industry has been like a town that has struck gold. Like a tent city growing so fast it can't keep up with itself, with vineyards and wineries springing up almost overnight. Gold fever has attracted all sorts of types to the business – prospectors, investors, ne'er-do-wells, teetotalers, crooks. Logic and business plans have been tossed out the window as success stories entice the unfortunate down the boulevard of broken dreams. One grape grower becomes a millionaire while another goes under. One sells grapes for \$5,000 a tonne; another has to leave his grapes on the vine because the cost of picking is more than they are worth.

Careers in the wine industry have been taking the same heady ride. Few areas of employment have offered the opportunity to climb so high or plummet so low. You could be swanning about the world showcasing your product one week and unemployed the next. But amid the hype and brouhaha, the cream has inevitably made its way to the top. The three winemakers you'll meet here exemplify the cream. They've steadily pursued their craft, impervious to the turmoil and hype of the business, and have left behind a trail of bottles filled with a liquid legacy to their skill. In a decade or so, they've risen to the top of the wine business. They're the new generation of movers and shakers...

MR McLAREN VALE

Few people are ever as busy as Ben Riggs (pictured left). With four of his own brands, a host of consultancies and a fair bit of contract winemaking to boot, vintage 2004 saw him travelling to half a dozen wineries once, sometimes twice, a day to check ferments. On top of that, there was a weekly trip to Adelaide Airport at the crack of dawn to get on a plane to Melbourne, then a drive to Heathcote in central Victoria to check up on grapes, before flying back to Adelaide the same day to look at more ferments. Ben Riggs' vehicles get a beating – he clocked 48,000 km one year, but having a lot going on is how he likes it. "I don't have a hobby," he admits. "What would I do if I wasn't in the wine business?"

In vintage 2005, things were a little less hectic. Riggs' company, the Galvanized Wine Group, purchased the old Maglieri winery in McLaren Vale. He uses it for contract winemaking and developing his own brands. After spending 14 years with the Wirra Wirra label, Riggs left to launch his own company in 2001. He started with four staff. Now he has 20, a couple of whom are handpicked winemakers to look after things while he's elsewhere, and he's gone from nothing to about

140,000 cases annually. His own brands start with 'Mr. Riggs', "winemakers wines", as he describes them. "An indulgence," admits Riggs, "but I figure if I make a good enough wine, there's always going to be someone out there to buy it." Penny's Hill is the more serious estate-brand label, which has achieved considerable fame for its Shiraz. Woop Woop is a value-for-money label aimed at the export market, while Black Chook has grown to become a more upmarket label. The defining thing about all these wines is that they fill their price point and marketing aim perfectly but also give a little bit more. Mr. Riggs offers great wines with interesting stylistic quirks; Penny's Hill has amazing concentration for the money; Woop Woop wines have a style and balance that are not always a priority at a \$12 price point; while Black Chook promises an exciting future.



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The Riggs impact on McLaren Vale is eminently obvious, as the results of this year's McLaren Vale wine show reveal. Apart from the fact that he was awarded Bushing King (for the best wine of the show, Penny's Hill Shiraz 2004) for the second time, Riggs' wines figured very prominently in the medals. He could even take the credit for a gold medal that went to the delicious Wirra Wirra RSW Shiraz he made back at that vineyard in 1998. He's 41 and showing no signs of slowing down, so you should be enjoying Riggs' wines for some time to come.