Beechworth - home to three of the world's more remarkable wine producers

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Considering it's just off the road between Wodonga and Wangaratta, Beechworth ended up with a pretty anodyne name. But then it is a particularly charming place, for visitors and wine lovers alike.

Victoria's oldest and best-preserved goldmining town, it is just a few miles off the route any Melbournian would take up to ski country in the Victorian Alps. Its wide streets have solid Victorian names such as Alma, Sydney and Albert Roads and its handsome stone buildings on shaded boardwalks house enterprises as reassuring as bookshops and delis. Its official pride and joy is its old stone prison, but it is surely only a matter of time before it wakes up to the fact that it is home to three of the world's more remarkable wine producers.

Rick Kinzbrunner began it all in the early 1980s. A tall, monastic-looking man (except for the shorts) who is still learning to smile, he makes up for it with the passion behind his Giaconda Chardonnay. Born in the far north of Queensland, the grandson of a Viennese professor forced to move first to Manchester and then to Malaga, he trained as an engineer and worked in Sydney but got bitten by the romance of wine so set off to learn how it was made, first in New Zealand and then California. He was taken on by Warren Winiarski of Napa Valley's famous Stag's Leap Wine Cellars on the strength of his ability to make a decent front gate - which is still there, Kinzbrunner reports with some pride.

When he got back to Australia, the biggest local wine firm Brown Brothers took him on as assistant winemaker but I'm not at all surprised that he didn't turn out to be an ideal employee. In the early 1980s he decided to set up on his own, and chose the town of Beechworth simply because he had fallen in love with the town. 'I've never even done a soil analysis,' he told me, with more pride.

He now farms three tiny vineyards, one part-owned by his sister, one by a friend and his own eight acres below his house and winery just west of the town on a slope sheltered from the burning summer sun. The vines are well tended but it's winemaking that really turns him on. As soon as I arrived, I was ushered into the pristine winery, which was fed a calming violin sonata by his wife Ros from the living quarters on the floor above. Within seconds he had the pipette and two unusually fine tasting glasses in hand and began showing me, barrel by barrel, the ingredients that will go into the 2000 Giaconda Chardonnay. (He made wine marketing history last year by offering his entire 1999 vintage on the internet to be bid for by all-comers. The '99 Giaconda Chardonnay sold for up to 150 Australian dollars and an average of 80 dollars a bottle - the same sort of prices as an extremely smart white burgundy.)

He sniffed one early, relatively malodorous, but recognisably Burgundian sample. 'Most Aussies would be really worried by my sulphidy barrels, but for me about 10 per cent of this in the blend is great. My '96 would probably be thrown out of any Australian wine show [the conventional arbiters of wine quality in Australia] but I reckon these shows are our main problem, the reason why in Australia we've got so many very good wines in the middle but no really top ones. It's insanity to have shows judged by the winemakers themselves. They bring in foreign judges but then they stamp all over them.' I can testify to that, but kept my mouth shut as all I wanted to do was listen and taste.

Kinzbrunner makes quite a range of wines, a bit of Pinot Noir that he says he's trying to get more 'grunt' in to, some surprisingly weedy Cabernet, some experimental Shiraz and, from new vines, some quite stunning Roussanne: a basic bottling called Nantua and Aeolia, the direct rival to Giaconda Chardonnay. When he saw me drooling over it he almost smiled, or at least tightened his lips, before nodding 'Yes, that should shake up the white Rhone market in Australia a bit'.

Eventually we went into the back cellar to pick up some old wine for lunch. 'It's cooler than the other cellars but please excuse the smell of dead mice,' he said enigmatically. The Giaconda Chardonnay 1990 did not smell of dead mice, but of minerals and richness and reminded me, if anything, of a great California Chardonnay such as Kistler or Marcassin rather than a white burgundy. Kinzbrunner doesn't like his Chardonnays too skinny ('you need a certain amount of heat for power') and makes no secret of the fact that he takes his inspiration from such fine California winemakers as his mates Tony Soter of Etude and Dave Ramey (now making great Chardonnay under his own name). He is clearly too much of a loner to join in the mainstream Australian wine fraternity, has found the language a problem on his travels in Europe, but just loves to go to California for inspiration, sitting up half the night tasting and analysing bottles by the dozen. 'They don't do that in France', he says, exasperated.

There are two Australian winemakers he gets on with, however, neighbours who have come to enjoy some old vintages with the smoked kangaroo, great local cheeses and a salad dressed with Turley olive oil borne back by Rick from his last trip to the Napa Valley.

Barry Morey used to work for him at Brown Brothers and is the perfect foil. The son of a fruit farmer and descended from vine growers in Germany, he is the closest thing I have ever met to a son of the soil in the Australian wine business - and his flyblown, subterranean cellar the only one that could be confused with some *cave* in Burgundy. Where Rick is analytical and cerebral, lolloping Barry is clearly completely intuitive. Only when a visiting student insisted has he ever kept winemaking records, and those vines of his just can't stop themselves rewarding him with lovely fruit. No matter that perhaps he didn't plant the perfect grape varieties when he set up his own six-acre Sorrenberg vineyard on the other side of town in 1984. 'Gamay was a long shot. I kicked myself for planting it, but now, with my granite soil [same as Gamay's homeland Beaujolais], it seems to have earned itself quite a reputation. I even exchange a few bottles with Georges Duboeuf.' He shakes his head in wonder at the mention of the self-styled king of Beaujolais.

My favourite Sorrenberg wine is Barry's unusually full-bodied, confident Semillon/Sauvignon blend, a combination that doesn't usually turn me on but he seems to stuff his so full of bumptious fruit and character that I was completely won over by every vintage I tasted. I got the impression that actually selling his wine is a fairly low priority for Barry. 'Cellar door sales are not that important here. I put a sign up at the gate once, but it was a fair commitment. I found I couldn't get to the kids' gymkhanas and things, so I took it down and put it in the shed.'

If Rick should make the wine and Barry grow the grapes, the person most suited to selling it is the third winemaker at lunch, a relative junior in this context whose first vintage was 1999, ex adman Julian Castagna. Just before taking me to see his brand new vineyard next door to Rick, he berated Barry for charging only 11 Australian dollars wholesale for a bottle of his Gamay. 'Sydney restaurants are charging 60 dollars for it', he shouted indignantly, waving his hands in his flamboyant Italian way (he had only just discovered that his grandfather had made wine in his native Italy).

Castagna returned to Australia from London and has been hanging around Rick and Beechworth since the mid-1980s. When he finally took the plunge with his own vineyard he didn't want to compete directly with Rick so has planted mainly Shiraz with a bit of Sangiovese and Viognier. If Barry is a bit of an *idiot-savant*, Julian is canny. His first Shiraz was already included in an important collection of Top 100 Australian wines and it is selling for US$200 a bottle in the US. He has put his tiny export allocation in the hands of Dan Phillips whose southern California import company The Grateful Palate might now be renamed The Grateful Wallet, so successful has he been at feeding America's powerful wine guru Robert Parker with his favourite Australian wines.

During my visit to the Castagnas' new winery (barrels behind a curtain, cooking and sleeping facilities in one corner), Julian was waiting to hear whether his wine would become the one and only Aussie on the list at Spago. He priced his frst releases in the US so high that Robert Parker commented, before awarding 87 and 96 points to a rosé and Syrah priced at 40 and 100 US dollars, 'some serious egos must be at work behind the pricing of both these wines'.

Expect to hear more of the Castagna wine label. Expect to hear very little of Sorrenberg, unless you dig it out via UK importers Ballantynes of Cowbridge. And the easiest way to get your hands on any of Rick Kinzbrunner's wines is to log on to www.giaconda.com.au. Some of this wine also reaches the UK via Morris & Verdin of London SE1 (sales@m-v.co.uk).

But Beechworth is well worth a visit - and, like all Australian wine regions - is expanding fast. New vines are going into the ground all the time, but I cannot believe they will be tended by such strong and complimentary characters as Messrs Kinzbrunner, Morey and Castagna who between them prove that there is much more to Australian wine than technology.