WA's prime vineyard abandoned

21 Apr 2011 by Jancis Robinson

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Cullen, Moss Wood and the like have done a great job for Margaret River specifically, but if Western Australian wine could be said to have an icon, it is Houghton's multi-trophy-winning Jack Mann bottling. Once the current 2011 vintage is safely in barrel, however, its future looks in serious doubt. The world's second largest wine company Constellation, based in the US but now owners of Houghton, reportedly decided not to renew their longstanding lease on the exceptional large vineyard responsible for Jack Mann and most of their top wines. For many observers, this is WA's finest vineyard - certainly the finest one of any size. (Eighty per cent of Constellation Australia and Europe was sold to private equity firm CHAMP at the end of last year, as reported here.)

The pioneering 89-hectare vineyard south west of Frankland in the Great Southern region occupies a special place in the history of Western Australian wine. It was first planted in 1970, on a vast estate owned by John Roche, once Lord Mayor of Adelaide, after a major viticultural study in the early 1960s. Indeed, according to James Halliday, the New South Wales wine sage Maurice O'Shea always said that if he had his time over again, he would have established vines in this area (not that he ever visited it). The vineyard was the first in the Frankland River subregion and its very first wine, a 1972 vinified by Sandalford, won a gold medal. Throughout the 1970s its grapes, bought by Sandalford and other local producers, established a considerable reputation and by the late 1970s Houghton, the dominant Western Australian wine producer, had negotiated a lease on the vineyard.

Called variously over the years Westfield, Houghton Frankland River, Netley Brook and Justin, the vineyard has been the source of many of Houghton's best reds, including the Jack Mann Cabernet that is the jewel in Houghton's crown, a substantial proportion of the CW Ferguson Cabernet/Malbec and some top-quality Shiraz. Thanks perhaps to a slightly damper climate than in many other WA wine regions, the vineyard has also produced some exceptional Riesling, including some late-harvest versions about which Halliday expressed huge enthusiasm in his 1985 *Australian Wine Compendium*.

The Roche family have shown no inclination to sell this precious vineyard (which I visited some years ago with a representative of nearby Ferngrove vineyard, who was roundly abused by the Houghton vineyard manager for not having asked permission in advance to show me round). WA's star winemaker Larry Cherubino, responsible for some of the best vintages of Jack Mann in his time, is reported to have been asked by the Roche family to handle negotiations for the sale of the average annual output of 600 tons of grapes from the vineyard from the 2012 vintage onwards. He is expected to take some of the fruit himself, with interest in the rest having already been expressed by the likes of Howard Park and nearby Riesling specialists Frankland Estate.

The winemakers at Houghton are reportedly bemused at the prospect of having to continue the legacy of the state's biggest fine-wine producer without the vineyard primarily responsible for its success. Presumably Constellation will do their best to secure some parcels of fruit from this great vinyard?

Of course this is far from the only instance of Constellation's disregard for Australian wine history. See, for example, Shocking news from South Australia in June 2009.