

# YALUMBA SCHOLARSHIP REPORT

JOE FATTORINI

## Introduction

The Yalumba scholarship offers two remarkable opportunities for the price of one entry essay. Flying away from a week at the Melbourne MW seminar to Adelaide you experience that slightly battered exhaustion familiar to anyone who has been on a Master of Wine education seminar week. Yet the next morning at the historic Yalumba winery, straddling the Eden and Barossa valley boundary, there's a viognier breakfast (with the intriguing line in the itinerary that confirms it 'includes shiraz/viognier') to revive and enthuse you for the fascinating week ahead.

## The Melbourne Master of Wine Seminar

In offering the scholarship, Yalumba's proprietor Robert Hill-Smith, was keen that a European or American MW student experience the seminar programme from an Australasian perspective. Whilst the seminar programme might look familiar, the week is very different. Broad generalisations perhaps, but here the atmosphere is more relaxed and collegial. Among the Australasian student body there are more technical specialists as well as the fascinating insights of those who come from, or work within, the emerging and growing markets of Asia. Whilst tasting notes in Europe tend towards the literary, here they tend towards bulleted identification of faults and technical analysis. Is there a happy medium? A synthesis of the two suggests that European students need to work harder on a technical unravelling the component parts of a wine. Meanwhile Australasian students must continue not simply to try European wines, but also to understand them. *Brettanomyces* is a hackneyed example. But with Brett, volatility in Italian reds or fusty oak in old-fashioned Spain, Australasian students need sometimes to accept a broader 'multiculturalism' of taste.

## Visit to Yalumba

Could there be a better property for the aspirant (or what Oz Clarke calls the 'perspirant') Master of Wine candidate to visit than Yalumba? Here, within arguably Australia's most successful family-run business is almost every stage in the wine value chain bar retailing. Nigel Blieschke and his team at the Yalumba Nursery provide much of the Australian industry with high quality clonal material, doing pioneering work with Viognier, and understanding the sometimes-beneficial effects of slightly viral stock. In turn, the nursery team works closely with viticulturalists and vineyard managers like Robert 'Fred' Strachan and Marty Burnell, practising broad acre viticulture at Oxford Landing. Winemaker Louisa Rose takes us to the very different, world famous vineyards of Pewsey Vale and Heggies in the Eden Valley, tasting the differences plot by plot. Then with winemaker Kevin Glastonbury we visit classic, old Barossa vines farmed by the same families for generation. At the vineyard of Graham Fromm truly old vines planted in 1925 are split in the middle, eaten away by termites, but still producing. A stark contrast to the large, disciplined, regimented rows at Oxford Landing. As with so many Barossa plots, Graham is not there. He's off on his day job as a 'truckie'.

In the winery, the contrasts continue. At the original Angaston site where Yalumba is headquartered, wines from Yalumba's Y Series to Barossa and Eden fine and rare wines like The Octavius and The Virgilius are produced. Down the road in the Barossa valley floor the new, large Moppa winery produces Oxford Landing on an altogether different scale. Four tank farms, two 100 tonne presses, winemaker options galore through JU.CLA.S tangential filter, centrifuges and rotary drum filter. Early in my MW studies Jancis Robinson MW offered the advice 'never miss a fact'. There were no shortage of facts, my notes remarking on the use of pea protein for vegan friendly wines, the water use ratio at Moppa (1.2/1 but the target is 1/1), the core crew (twenty, rising to sixty in vintage for a 30,000 tonne winery) and so on. There are ten pages like this.

But many companies can show visitors vineyards (of differing scales) and wineries (similarly varied in size). Few also have an on-site cooperage, making barrels from barriques to puncheons to the small, specialist 90l vessels of ‘octaves’ used in maturing The Octavius. Few also have an arm of the business like Negotiants, with expertise in both exporting wine to various subsidiaries around the world (and all the knowledge that brings) but also importing an enviable portfolio of wines into Australia. This undoubtedly gives Yalumba a much broader perspective. At the ‘Viognier Breakfast’ with winemakers Louisa Rose and Andrew La Nauze and Negotiants boss Brenton Fry, I asked if there was a tension between the various arms of the business – the winemakers and the merchants? All agreed that there wasn’t. The culture of the firm, fostered by Robert Hill-Smith, leads to a collaborative approach. For instance where the Oxford Landing team are asked to execute quite complex variations in irrigation and pruning to account for the nursery’s different combinations of rootstock and scion, block-by-block. Despite the nicknames (Nigel ‘Pythagoras’ Blieschke, owing to the complexity of his instructions) there was a grudging acceptance that this complexity was for the general good of the finished product and a necessary intervention.

But what was most useful was to spend a week in the company of one of Australia’s most talented teams. Brian Walsh, the wine trade ‘legend’ and immensely experienced man at the helm. Louisa Rose, the winemaker who modestly rejects the modifier ‘Head’, who as a young appointee persuaded the firm to put its faith in Viognier. Head viticulturalist Robin Nettelbeck is an acknowledged expert on irrigation who must be proving his worth at the moment. His work with the AWRI in Oxford Landing is revealing just how dry vines can go whilst still surviving. Or Cecil Camilleri, the driving force behind Yalumba’s own wealth of sustainability initiatives, who has also been hugely influential in developing the Greenhouse Gas calculator for New World wineries available through the Winemakers’ Federation of Australia ([www.wfa.org.au/environment.htm](http://www.wfa.org.au/environment.htm)). Or Jane Ferrari, the ‘face of Yalumba’ familiar to thousands around the world. Her passion to help the visitor understand what makes the Barossa and Yalumba special and place them in the context of the sweep of history knows no bounds.

At the Adelaide Oval on Australia Day we watched the fourth Australia v India test match with Robert Hill-Smith. We sat across from the Clem Hill Stand, named in honour of Robert’s relation, the first batsman to surpass 1000 test runs in a season in 1902. A feat that would not be bettered until 1945, the year he died, knocked down by a tram in Melbourne. Robert’s family history is woven into so much of South Australia’s past and clearly sees himself as ‘custodian’ of the Yalumba business, not owner. There is much about the business that is reminiscent of traditional, long-term, European wine companies. He also clearly values what the Institute of Masters of Wine does for the wine business he is passionate about. Albeit a rather languid, Australian expression of ‘passion’ – no Italian histrionics here. I am immensely grateful to him and all his team for their welcome, openness, hard work and generosity that made this trip so remarkable. Studying for the MW is unquestionably a tough business. Not everyone can visit every country, and despite writing about wine for over thirteen years, I’d never had the opportunity to visit Australia and its wealth of wines and wine making talent.. For that, and so more, I am incredibly grateful to Yalumba.