



Pinnaroo passion

Yellowtail leads to an interesting offshoot, **Chris Shanahan** writes

What an awesome sight the Casella family's Griffith winery is from the air – a glittering expanse of massive stainless steel tanks housing tens of millions of litres of wine destined for the highly successful Yellow Tail label.

It might smack of homogeneity. But in fact the wine inside those tanks represents a vast network of independent grape growers spread across south-eastern Australia – including the slopes of the Great Dividing Range in New South Wales.

This is the story of one of those vineyards – one piece in the giant Casella jigsaw.

Casella makes the fabulously successful Yellowtail brand. In May this year British consultancy Intangible Business named it the most powerful Australian wine brand in the world and No 37 in the top 100 wine and spirit brands globally. And in the *Shanken News* report of July 5, 2011, Yellowtail topped the list of Australian imports into the United States in 2010 at 8.5 million dozen bottles – four times the volume of second placed Lindemans.

My back-of-the-envelope reckoning puts total production at perhaps 12 million dozen bottles a year – given that Yellowtail sells domestically and Casella exports to around 50 countries.

On the same envelope, with the help of Boorowa viticulturist Mark Sims, we computed 12 million cases translates to around 160,000 tonnes of grapes from vines covering between 10,000 and 11,000ha. Little wonder, then, that the capital investment and risk is so widely dispersed.

Sims says he's worked as a middle man for Casella for many years, managing vineyards and sourcing up to 20,000 tonnes of grapes a year along the western slopes of the Great Divide, between Mudgee and Cowra.

About 10 years back Sims and a couple of farming mates from Warren and Nyngan thought they'd grow grapes together. After a long search, a very attractive property became available on the Belubula River, Canovindra.

The property, Belubula Farm, had originally produced hay, lucerne and chaff, says Sims. A new owner used it for cattle and changed the name to Pinnaroo.

The little idea became a bigger one requiring more capital, so the original mates "pulled in extra partners, pooled our capital and formed Pinnaroo Partners", say Sims.

From 2002, they established a 110ha vineyard, contracted to Casella and planted 90 per cent to chardonnay and five per cent each to viognier and pinot gris.

Sims says the vineyard runs

east to west, peaking at about 400m above sea level. The east-west orientation provides under-canopy shade for the berries, says Sims, a veteran of grape growing in this warm area.

Sims manages the vines and the families from Warren (Glen and Narelle Whittaker) and Nyngan (Paul and Jenny Buckley) look after the farm. The other partners are all regular visitors: Mark Sim's wife, Luisa, Mark and Cathy Beach of Warren, David Buckley of Newcastle, Peter and Margaret Carnell of Dubbo, Glen and Michelle Hamblin of Nevertire, Chris and Mary Logan of Sydney and Peter and Suzie Sims of Canberra.

But like most contract grape growers, the Pinnaroo partners began to produce a little wine for themselves – selecting small parcels of the best fruit and sending it to winemaker Richard Parker at Long Rail Gully, Murrumbateman.

Of course, friends then wanted some, so they created the Pinnaroo brand and sell it through www.pinnaroo-wines.com.au

Quantities remain small, but these are seriously good wines from an estate that normally slakes the thirst of those mighty Yellowtail tanks in Griffith.

■ **Pinnaroo Estate Partners**



Reserve Cowra Viognier 2010 (\$25): Viognier provides a unique drinking experience. Yalumba pioneered the variety some thirty years ago.

The early stand-alone versions tend to be picked very ripe, resulting in high-alcohol whites with sometimes over-the-top apricot-like varietal flavour and, a solid bite of tannin and a thick, sometimes oily texture.

These are all natural qualities of the grape. But it's possible to maintain the varietal characteristics in a much more refined package – demonstrated in this delicious version, made by Richard Parker at Long Rail Gully, Murrumbateman.

The Pinnaroo partners hand harvested the grapes at a comparatively low 12.9 per cent alcohol potential – not the 14.5 or 15 per cent often seen from comparable climates.

In Parker's hands this translated to a full-flavoured, aromatic dry white, displaying clear-cut apricot and ginger varietal character. He matured the wine

on yeast lees for 12 months, building a lovely, soft creaminess that sits well with the natural viscosity of the style. It's a comparatively delicate expression of viognier.

■ **Pinnaroo Estate Partners Reserve Cowra Chardonnay 2009 (\$25):** This is an exciting wine – and far removed from the Cowra chardonnay stereotype. At two years we might expect a dark-golden, fat-but-fading peachy dry white. Instead we have a lemon-coloured, vibrant barrel-fermented chardonnay displaying great flavour intensity (melon rind and white peach), subtly enhanced by barrel fermentation and maturation on yeast lees. A wonderfully rich but fine texture matches the intense fruit flavour. And the alcohol's a modest 12.9 per cent.

Sims says it's made from the best chardonnay block on the 110ha vineyard – planted to the Entav 76 clone. Richard Parker made the wine at Long Rail Gully, Murrumbateman.

■ **Pinnaroo Estate Partners**

Reserve Hilltops Shiraz 2008 (\$25): Like Canberra, the Hilltops region around Young makes delicious shiraz, albeit in a generally fleshier style than Canberra's – but still medium bodied and far removed from, say, the bolder Barossa versions.

We enjoyed the combination of skilful grape growing by Sims and sensitive winemaking by Parker at Long Rail Gully.

The grapes seemed to have been picked at just the right point of ripeness – with the varietal, ripe-cherry flavours at full tilt and packed with the vibrancy of fresh berries. This comes through on the highly aromatic, slightly savoury, spicy aroma and on the juicy, fine-boned palate – a kiss of French oak sweetness adding to the pleasure of the shiraz flavour. Grapes come from Mark and Luisa Sim's Boorowa vineyard.

>> Chris Shanahan is a wine and beer judge, former liquor retailer and freelance writer.



Pinnaroo started as a producer for the Casella's Yellowtail label but then started making its own wine