



Bel Air
CHARDONNAY

The essential role of oak at Australia's Leeuwin Estate

Journalist **Hans Mick** recently travelled to Margaret River where he caught up with Leeuwin Estate's senior winemaker Tim Lovett to learn about the use of oak in the winery's acclaimed Art Series Chardonnay. Hans' interview is one of several being conducted with leading wineries from around the world exploring the evolution of their use of oak as part of the project 'Wood in Enology', organised by the Italian wine industry association Unione Italiani Vini. The interviews will be presented at the Wood in Enology conference being held as part of SIMEI this November.

For Leeuwin Estate, one of Australia's most prestigious wineries, the role of oak in winemaking is clear: to complement and not to distract from the unique characteristics of its vineyard site.

Located in the Margaret River wine region of Western Australia, Leeuwin is a family-owned and operated winery that's gained an international reputation for its outstanding wines, among them its highly-acclaimed Art Series Chardonnay.

In the early 1970s, the future site of Leeuwin Estate was identified as ideal for premium wine production by renowned Napa Valley winemaker Robert Mondavi. He provided early mentorship to owners Denis and Tricia Horgan who converted what had been a cattle farm into a vineyard.

Its first commercial vintage was in 1979 and international recognition followed shortly after in 1981 when *Decanter* magazine awarded the Art Series Chardonnay its highest recommendation. International accolades have continued in the decades since.

Managed by a new generation of the Horgan family, the winery now produces between 60,000 and 65,000 cases of wine per year with "the most opulent and age worthy" wines from each vintage chosen for its top-tier Art Series range that also includes Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz.

Senior winemaker Tim Lovett said the winemaking philosophy at Leeuwin is simple – it's about a translation of the estate's vineyard site to the glass.

"It really is site that makes Leeuwin so special," he said.

The grapes used to produce the Art Series wines are sourced from unirrigated and hand-harvested blocks on the estate, two of which – the celebrated Block 20 and Block 22 – include the earliest plantings of Chardonnay in the Margaret River region, dating from 1976 and 1978.

"Those blocks have lateritic iron rich gravel and are quite skeletal, so the vines are not too vigorous; they produce very small crops but of very high intensity and good concentration of fruit with naturally high acidity levels," said Lovett.

The location and climate of the region are also given credit for influencing the estate's distinctive qualities.



Leeuwin Estate senior winemaker Tim Lovett with a bottle of Art Series Chardonnay.

"We exist in a Mediterranean climate but we are bound by the Indian Ocean and the Southern Ocean. We have a beautiful cooling aspect where our daytime temperatures remain very moderate and our night time temperatures aren't as cool as most other Australian regions. We don't have too much diurnal difference and that gives us consistency of fruit, fruit concentration and acidity," Lovett explained.

"It makes our wines quite unique. We have quite dynamic wines with a lot of energy, a lot of vitality and power.

"When picking fruit for Art Series Chardonnay, on the fruit spectrum we are striving for cut lime, pear, white nectarine and maybe lemon to a degree in certain vintages."

Once the grapes are harvested, Lovett said the main objective all the way through the winemaking process, including during fermentation and bâtonnage, is to "protect and nurture" those natural qualities within the fruit.

He said this reflects a "respect for the fruit" and ensures that winemaking artefacts don't end up overlaying the fruit's character in the finished wine.

Selection of oak barrels

This minimalist approach is readily apparent when it comes to the selection and use of oak barrels at Leeuwin Estate.

"We're looking for oak to support or to work with that fruit, we're not looking for the oak [profile] to override the fruit

or to have it distract from the fruit's freshness or opulence," Lovett explained.

"Again, it's about the reflection of vineyard; it's that articulation of berry to glass. We don't want to see that wine being oaky. We want to see the backbone of the oak with the wine, and having it in the background."

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For its Art Series Chardonnay, Leeuwin Estate selects "100 per cent new" French oak barrels sourced mainly from coopers in Bordeaux, although a small number of barrels are also sourced from Burgundy and the Rhône region.

"The reason I select Bordelais coopered oak is the grain tightness is a lot finer and the toasting is a little more diligent and more accurate," Lovett said. ▶



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A section of the barrel storage shed at Leeuwin Estate.

“The toasting for Burgundian coopers tends to be a little bit heavier, and I think that overshadows and gives a different portrayal of the fruit, which is a little bit disguised.”

“Every cooper has their DNA, or their footprint, on the wine too. So whether it’s the structure of the barrel or whether the cooper is more focused on aromatics or on texture, for us it’s all about weaving through these notes and then being able to place particular barrels for specific sites. Ultimately, when these are put together as a piece of the puzzle, you then formulate symmetry in support of the fruit.”

There’s one thing wrong with unoaked Chardonnay and it is that it doesn’t have any oak.

According to Leeuwin’s senior winemaker, the impact of oak on wine in general has noticeably shifted over the last two decades.

“If you take Chardonnay, for instance, a lot of the oak used in the late 1980s and early 1990s had more of an alternative aspect. So rather than using a 225L or a 228L barrique, staves or an oak bag were used and therefore the oak tended to be a little more aggressive.

“Chardonnay back in the ‘80s and ‘90s was very full, rich, buttery, and with the oak alternatives, kind of heavy. I think that’s where Chardonnay fell out of favour a little bit.

“Drawing a timeline to now, we’re being more defined and have more precision to create the elegance and structure without seeing overt oak notes,” Lovett said.

He said despite the popularity in certain market segments for ‘no oak’ wines, wood continues to have an essential role at Leeuwin Estate. He said the estate’s premium varieties would be unimaginable without it.

“The concept of Art Series Chardonnay being an unoaked Chardonnay; it will never happen because the wine is the communication of fruit and oak. The oak provides structure; it assists with the length that the fruit already has. It promotes acidity; the nuances of toasty, nutty notes; complexity on the

For other wine growing regions, I know puncheons are heavily used for Chardonnay. We’re primarily in a 225L or 228L barrique format that is suitable to our wine style.

nose; and texture and weight on the palate. You can’t have one without the other.

“There’s one thing wrong with unoaked Chardonnay and it is that it doesn’t have any oak,” Lovett quipped.

He makes it clear that when it comes to oak selection, market trends have little influence on his winery’s choices.

All about pedigree

“It’s not like making gin or making beer where you’re making it specifically to market. With an icon wine producer such as Leeuwin Estate, it’s all about pedigree.

“We have our own signature on the wine. Oak use is not determined by style or the demand of the consumer.

“We’re not going to go down the line of buying a barrel that might be toastier or caramel or chocolate because there’s a particular portion of consumers who like that style,” Lovett said.

Similarly, the choice of barrel format is unwavering.

“For other wine growing regions, I know puncheons are heavily used for Chardonnay. We’re primarily in a 225L or 228L barrique format that is suitable to our wine style,” Lovett said.

“Our Chardonnay from the estate – and from the greater part of Margaret River – is the Gin Gin clone. It’s very powerful and it’s very rich, but also has a sparkling acidity and finesse; so you want a smaller format oak so there is a greater amount of oak to volume or wine ratio.”

However, the larger format 600 litre ‘demi-muid’ barrel is used for Leeuwin Estate’s Shiraz.

“This is more subtle and elegant to work with a Shiraz that’s coming from a Mediterranean climate with maritime influence,” explained Lovett of the barrel type.

He said that typically barrels at Leeuwin are in circulation for three or four years before they are sold off to other wine producers that prefer older oak.

“For us, we see all of the benefits with the barrel’s first use and we probably see that diminish by around 50 per cent in its second use, or as one-year-old oak.

“After that we see it more as a vessel which is permeable through the grain in its third and fourth use, if we require that,” he said.

Lovett started working as a winemaker at Leeuwin Estate in 2010 after spending his earlier years at several different wineries in Margaret River and in various other Australian wine regions. He was elevated to the role of senior winemaker at Leeuwin in 2016 after the retirement of Paul Atwood, who had held the position for more than a decade.



The Leeuwin Estate winery and cellar door (left) and barrel storage facility.

Despite changes in personnel, Lovett said there has been little variation over the last four decades in how the winery views the role of oak in its winemaking.

However, he emphasised that where change had occurred has been in the nature of the oak barrels themselves, and he said this has repercussions for winemakers.

“Barrels do change and the philosophies of coopers change, so as a winemaker you need to move and flow with those coopers,” he said.

“I think some of the coopers that you would have seen maybe 10 or 15 years ago have quite a different overlay or quite a different identity to what they do now.

“As someone on the wine manufacturing side, it is up to you to be quite proactive instead of reactive in terms of seeing how that is going to have interplay on your wine.”

Lovett said one specific change that’s happened with the oak sourced from forests within France has been that coopers are now offering a finer selection when it comes to grain consistency and tightness. He said this has moved the focus away from oak being “forest specific” to there now being a greater emphasis on grain selection.

“A decade ago forests would determine selection for the winemaker. Whether it was Allier or Tronçais or another, a winemaker would say, ‘well, that’s what I want with the wine’. But it’s now more about having a tight grain or a wider grain, and that would be the determining factor.”

In order to determine what works best for Leeuwin Estate, Lovett said trials of coopers and their barrel products are taking place constantly.



Barrel trials

“We will be trialling perhaps five or six different coopers each year, depending on how the previous vintage unfolded.

“We will do classification tastings and blind tastings in terms of what cooper pairs well with each block, and we’ll select around three or four different parcels of fruit to understand the identity of the cooper and the barrel. Within each cooper there may be three or four different types of barrel.

“This always encourages refinement and evolution within our oak program.”

Leeuwin’s massive barrel storage facility sits apart from the estate’s attractively-designed main building, which houses the winery, cellar door, art gallery and an acclaimed restaurant. The above ground barrel shed by contrast is functional and non-descript. It is refrigerated and insulated against the region’s warm summer days which peak on average just below


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The recently harvested 'Block 20', one of the sources for Leeuwin Estate's Art Series wines, has the earliest plantings of Chardonnay in the Margaret River region.

30 degrees Celsius. Filled with the intense smell of fermenting wine and maturing wine, the facility has the capacity to hold up to 3000 barrels. Each one of the barriques - stacked high and almost reaching the ceiling - bears the brand mark of its original French maker. Currently there are barrels being utilised from 20 different coopers.

Lovett said that strong relationships have been developed with all of the barrel suppliers and that this allows a clear articulation of the winery's requirements.

"We work tirelessly with them in terms of the trialling. By having a very close rapport, we can then start to branch out within the cooper to look at different barrels, whether it's with the toasting or grain selection or another aspect of their portfolio.

"We will say to them, 'these are the characters that we're getting within the cooperage - should we look at something else?'"

An important part of maintaining the close, personal relationship between winemaker and cooper is Lovett's regular travel to France.

Every two years, he makes the long journey from Margaret River to personally experience the many facets of Bordelais or Burgundian barrel-making, "from tree to finished product" as he describes it.

"Each cooper has their own way of doing things and that's what identifies them as being different and unique," he said.

He relishes the opportunity to walk through the forests to look at the oak that's being selected and he also visits oak seasoning yards, stave mills and the cooperages where the barrels are manufactured.

"We'll walk into a forest that's 150 years old. This is usually the timeframe, between 150 and 200 years, when they will fell the tree to go into barrel production.

"Oak forests have a 300-year cycle overall so that passes through a lot of generations. To meet the individuals involved in that process and who are carrying on those legacies; to walk through the forest, to feel it, to see the microflora and to kick the dirt [...] it gives you ultimate confidence and assurance about the products' consistency," Lovett said.

In return, representatives from the cooperages are invited to visit Leeuwin Estate to gain first-hand knowledge about how their barrels are performing.

"We encourage every cooper that we buy barrels from to come and taste our product out of the barrel," Lovett said.

In describing the essential traits that make Leeuwin Estate's Art Series Chardonnay the highly praised wine that it is, Lovett can't hide his satisfaction.

"It's a wine that has freshness, it has capacity, it's opulent and it's age worthy. It has subtle textures and layers and contours."

He said the creation of the wine is very much a "team effort", with all those involved from the vine to the bottle sharing his passion as custodians of the brand.

"We all live and breathe Leeuwin, whether you're in the vineyard as a viticulturist or a harvester, whether you're in the winery as a cellar hand or a winemaker or a senior winemaker like myself, we're in it together and we are unequivocally proud of what we produce."

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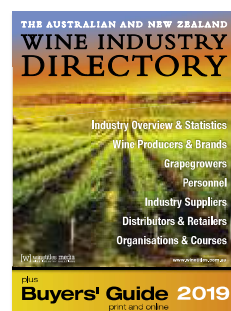
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