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Through the looking glass with WA's rebel winemakers

The Great Southern region is reaping the rewards from an influx of adventurous newcomers.



[Max Allen](#) Drinks columnist
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I'm sitting at a table in a small warehouse-cum-winery in an industrial park in the town of Denmark, on [Western Australia](#)'s south coast. The table is crowded with glasses and bottles, and sitting around it are four of the most adventurous winemakers in the Great Southern region: Andrew Hoadley of La Violetta Wines, Ryan O'Meara of Express Winemakers, and Andries Mostert and Yoko Luscher-Mostert of Brave New Wine, whose venue we're in.

I've just been treated to an extraordinarily diverse line-up of wines from these three producers, everything from super-funky skins-fermented riesling blends to super-spicy wild-fermented syrah, from lean and crisp chenin blanc to super-ripe grenache.

[Last week in this column](#) I wrote about the long-established producers in Great Southern refining the region's well-known mainstream wine styles. This week we've stepped through the looking glass for an alternative view of what the region can do, courtesy of the rebels and newcomers.

Changes to WA's licensing regulations have encouraged the development of a thriving small bar scene.

Hoadley has been around the longest: he made his first [La Violetta](#) wine, a shiraz, in 2008, as a sideline to his day job at Castelli winery in Denmark. Since devoting himself full time to his own label in 2014, he's established a great reputation for his wide range (30 labels at last count) of often quirkily named wines all vaguely on the natural spectrum – everything from five different pét-nats (sparkling wines that finish fermentation in the bottle) to brilliant small batches of vermentino and pinot meunier; from a superb orange wine called Rock Dots to a fabulous grenache blend called Almirante y Obispo (the admiral and the bishop).

O'Meara worked at a number of Great Southern wineries before setting out on his own in 2015 with his [Express label](#). He now leases a vineyard and small winery shed in Mount Barker and makes a slightly smaller range of wines, again very much in the natural mould.



View of the Swinney family vineyard. *Supplied*

Mostert and Luscher-Mostert still have day jobs – he’s a winemaker at Castle Rock Estate in Porongurup; she works at Singlefile's cellar door in Denmark – but the pair somehow manage to make around a dozen radical wines under the [Brave New label](#) each vintage, from pét-nats to riesling fermented with native botanicals.

Between them, these winemakers have stacked up loads of experience across the region, and in the process, they’ve got to know most of the growers – very handy for sourcing small parcels of sometimes overlooked grapes to make their small batches of boundary-pushing wine.

They also all established their businesses at just the right time: changes to Western Australia’s licensing regulations three years ago have encouraged the development of a thriving small bar scene particularly in Perth, and the thirst in the eastern states for natural and funky wines like theirs appears to be insatiable.

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But they’re not the only ones doing things differently in Great Southern.

Hoadley, Mostert and Luscher-Mostert point to the Swinney family’s large vineyard in Frankland River as a source of really good grapes grown in a non-mainstream way. And when I visit the vineyard I’m surprised to see, among the many hectares of conventionally grown grapes (most of which is sold to large companies over east such as Treasury and Oatley), a few blocks of 15-year-old dry-grown bush-vine grenache, mourvèdre and tempranillo.

Growing grapes like this, the old-fashioned way, seems like madness in a region as dry as Frankland. But it has paid off. In 2018, the Swinneys took on winemaker Rob Mann (ex-Cape Mentelle and grandson of legendary WA winemaker Jack Mann) to help take their own wines to the next level. The first results of that collaboration, due for release in August under the Swinney label, are fantastic: the grenache, in particular, tastes like no other Australian example of this variety and will change perceptions of the Frankland region – as will a truly outstanding reserve syrah, due out this time next year.

There are others. Swinney viticulturist Lee Haselgrove also owns a vineyard in Frankland River with his winemaker wife, Clemence, and they produce small quantities of wine under their label, L'Enclos du Tertre, including a syrah/grenache blend.



The Swinney family's vineyard features a few blocks of grenache, mourvèdre and tempranillo. *Supplied*

Freehand is a small Mount Barker producer of preservative-free organic wines; Guy Lyons of Forest Hill, mentioned last week, has his own label, Low Boi; and Forest Hill winemaker Liam Carmody also has his own small-batch label, Lonely Shore.

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Max Allen

The next new small Great Southern producer to watch out for (label name yet to be decided) is Chris Murtha, a winemaker at Plantagenet. A couple of years ago, Murtha and his partner Sylvia took over a small, long-abandoned two-hectare block of dry-grown vines in Mount Barker which, when it was established in the mid-1980s as Jeeleunup Gully, was WA's first biodynamic vineyard. In 2018, the couple picked enough fruit to make a riesling (which Murtha is keeping on lees for two years before bottling) and a pinot noir. Both wines, tasted out of the tank, are beautifully bright and fine.

The future of Great Southern wine is in good hands.

The writer travelled to Western Australia as a guest of the Great Southern Wine Producers Association and was hired by CMS Events to host wine tastings during the Taste Great Southern festival.

3 bottles pushing the boundaries

2018 La Violetta FAV [Great Southern]

Oustanding rich, textural white wine made from vermentino blended with a little semillon for complexity and some muscat for fragrance: creamy and mouthfilling, it has ravishing flavours of pulpy grape and green melon. In typical Andrew Hoadley fashion, there's a lovely, sardonic misquote from Fellini on the back label that translates roughly as, "I have nothing to say but I say it anyway." Take that, all you verbose marketing types. Available at Lulu la Delizia, the Perth restaurant that Hoadley made the wine for, or direct from the producer. \$32 laviolettawines.com.au



2018 Brave New Wine Dreamland [Great Southern]

It's riesling, Jim, but not as you know it. The grapes for this wine were wild fermented in older barrels, with bunches of local native botanicals thrown into the ferment to funk it up. The end result is deliciously weird: it sits stylistically somewhere between a tangy dry white wine and an unfortified, unsweetened vermouth. super refreshing served chilled, as an aperitif. Maybe even (hey, let's break all the wine rules) over ice, with a lemon myrtle leaf as garnish. \$38 bravenewwine.com.au

2018 Express Winemakers Syrah [Mount Barker]

Made from shiraz grapes sourced from three vineyards in the Mount Barker sub-region of Great Southern, this beautiful, vibrant young red wine was wild fermented and matured in old oak and ceramic pots to let the varietal flavours shine. Gorgeous perfume of game and peppery spice, juicy, dark fruit on the tongue and then fine, savoury, dusty tannins to finish. Exactly the kind of bright, young, medium-bodied syrah you'd want to have with rare sirloin and old-fashioned pepper sauce and French fries. \$30 expresswinemakers.com

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