



Thick as Thieves

WORDS

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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Photographic.

It's a phrase that conjures up feelings of mateship, playfulness and the freedom to defy rules, and is the perfect moniker for Syd Bradford's wines.



Syd Bradford's wines are one of a kind.

VARIETY, AS THEY SAY, is the spice of life. It is also one of the main drives for Yarra Valley-based winemaker Syd Bradford. His label, Thick as Thieves, offers an array of expertly crafted and quirkily named wines, from grapes familiar and uncommon.

Born and raised in Sydney's western suburbs, Bradford studied horticulture at UTS due to a love of "all things green", before travelling around Europe. In Antibes, France he met Anna, an Englishwoman who'd later become his wife, and together they were exposed to the wondrous food and wine culture of the country. They moved back to Australia and settled in Bondi. Though Bradford was unsure of which career he'd finally settle in, he'd known from childhood that it would likely be something outdoors and a job that was different every day.

Two events then helped to force his hand. The first was tasting the 2002 Coldstream Hills Pinot Noir, a variety he had only recently discovered and grown to love. The second was in 2003 on a road trip through Rutherglen, where he'd stopped at Pfeiffer Wines. Bradford asked how he could get 'a foot in the door' working in winemaking, and within three months took a job with Pfeiffer – at the same time he and his wife settled in Beechworth.

Able to explore Victoria further from their Beechworth base, Syd and Anna visited Healesville and fell in love with the town, which at that stage was still relatively sleepy. Bradford undertook a Bachelor of Wine Science through Charles Sturt University and started working for Coldstream Hills, then for Giant Steps, where he became a 'virtual winemaker', using their equipment to make his own wines with purchased grapes. A move to Rochford allowed Bradford to expand his operations, though he knew he would need to take a bigger step to maintain growth.

In 2012, Syd and Anna found 8 hectares for sale in Badger Creek, with 1.4 hectares dedicated to MV6 pinot noir, planted in 1997; a further 1.4 hectares had unfortunately been pulled out as the previous owners were concerned about the vines devaluing the property in a difficult real estate market. Bradford has since made several alterations, such as creating a private tasting room (open by appointment) and an on-site lab from recycled timbers and sheet metal, expanding the cellar into a temperature-controlled, subterranean cavern, and adding a few more rows of pinot noir.



Many people ask how the label got its name, which, it turns out, emerged after Bradford heard the term ‘thick as thieves’ used in conversation and realised it would be perfect for his wines. Right from the start, Bradford wanted to use uncommon varieties, as he “embrace[s] the wacky to a point”. One of the first he’d worked with at Giant Steps was arneis, a grape endemic to the Piedmont region of Italy but which has an increasing number of supporters and growers in Australia.

The wines have creative monikers such as Driftwood, a blend of pinot noir and gamay, which is “unshackled” from Old World regulations and is free to “do its own thing”. Others include Plump, referring to the mid-palate of a good pinot noir; The Aloof Alpaca, in honour of an animal that was fed arneis grapes; and Another Bloody Chardonnay, thumbing its nose at drinkers who would disdainfully utter “Anything but chardonnay”.

Bradford’s playfulness and his urge to bend and break the rules are just some of the reasons he has gained loyal followers and accolades, such as for his 2017 Levings Pinot Noir (named in honour of Peter and Bronwyn Levings, the previous owners of the property who planted the vines). About 50% of his fruit is sourced from John Darling in the King Valley, which allows him to work with grapes like sylvaner, arneis, gamay and nebbiolo, varieties rarely seen in the Yarra Valley – though pinot noir, gamay, chardonnay and nebbiolo still remain the focus in terms of volume.

“Being a boutique producer,” states Bradford, “I don’t have to answer to anyone.” This freedom means he doesn’t have to fight against expectations of a region’s strengths or weaknesses and he can produce, for example, a nebbiolo rosé.

Bradford’s love for pinot noir is clear through his offerings – he will “open a cabernet for every 200 bottles of pinot”. It is a grape that feels at home in the Yarra, and the mature vines on the property produce complex, elegant wines suitable for cellaring, as well as fresh, early drinking ones like the Driftwood.



At the moment, Bradford undertakes all the distribution for his wines himself, save for Queensland, which allows him to offer premium drops without the high price tag. He currently exports to China and Japan, and sees Asia as a potential growth point for his label in the next few years. Tastings are available for trade or for loyal customers but Bradford has no plans to open a cellar door.

As for the future, there are many projects. Bradford will soon begin soil testing on the site where vines were removed almost a decade ago, in order to plant more pinot noir on phylloxera-resistant rootstocks, with help from the Yarra Valley Winegrowers’ Association’s Scion Me Up service. Anna has also expressed a desire to have a more hands-on role in the business. She has a background in the tech industry, and Bradford recently utilised her skills to revamp his website.

Overall, Bradford would like to “work smarter, not harder”, given that he is a “one-man band from start to finish”, and he doesn’t want to lose some of the “wackiness” that has helped draw in customers who are keen to find something new. Given the quality of his wines, he should continue to attract a good following.



Bradford works “smart” to produce quirky, boutique wines.

2019 TaT Nebbiolo Rosé, A\$25

Light salmon colour with cranberry, rose, honeydew and liquorice on the nose and palate. The finish is dry, the acid medium, and the alcohol relatively low (12.4%), making a balanced and thoroughly quaffable wine. Made from King Valley fruit, which was destemmed, with skin contact for 24 hours, and only free-run juice used in the cool ferment in stainless steel tank.

2019 TaT Driftwood, A\$32

Like being whacked in the face by a punnet of strawberries. Absolutely bursting with red fruit on the nose and palate, and with a luscious mouthfeel. Indigenous ferment, half destemmed, half whole bunch, and no fining or filtration. Completely dry but your brain will swear there’s some sugar. Fruit from Yarra and King Valleys.

2017 TaT Levings, A\$55

The Levings is cherry, wild strawberry, spice and plum. There is a real elegance to the

wine which develops in the glass, particularly if you can make it last a second night. 100% estate MV6, 100% destemmed, indigenous ferment, and no fining or filtration.

