

A Textbook Winemaking History

In just over fifty years, the Margaret River Wine Region has earned an enviable reputation as a world leading fine wine destination. Unusually, its wine story was born from scientific research by prominent Viticulture Professor Dr Harold Olmo (UC Davis) and respected Western Australian Agronomist Dr John Gladstones (UWA), whose work spurred an enthusiasm for viticulture amongst the locals. History was made with the planting of the Vasse Felix vineyard in 1967 by wine pioneer Dr Tom Cullity. Its success, and that of Moss Wood (planted 1969) cued the start of something great. In the 1980s, Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay were catapulted to international fame when major accolades were achieved by Cape Mentelle and Leeuwin Estate. The Region's fiftieth anniversary was celebrated in 2017 with great fanfare, at which time there were 164 wine producers.

EARLY SETTLEMENT, EARLY VINES

The origins of winemaking in Western Australia align with establishment of the Swan River Colony (Perth) by the British in 1829. Soon after, farming settlements populated Augusta (1830) and Vasse (1841). Vines were planted from the earliest days in Vasse, and in the 1840s, a tiny commercial vineyard was planted near Busselton at a property called Westbrook by Elijah Dawson. This served the American whalers, who plied their trade in the local waters for most of the nineteenth century. Small plots were grown at several properties including that of the Credaro family. They settled in the Carburnup area in 1922 and have had at least one hectare planted across the generations.



Credaro and Meleri Families

FOUNDED UPON SCIENCE

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Swan Valley was Western Australia's primary wine growing area. In 1955, Professor of Viticulture at University California Davis, Dr Harold Olmo was invited to Western Australia to report on the problems and possibilities of the viticulture industry. (Olmo, 1956). Following an eight-month visit to the state, Olmo published, 'A Survey of the Grape Industry of Western Australia'.

The paper outlined the viticulture potential of the south-west of Australia, with Olmo stating: "Quality table wines are best produced in cooler regions where higher development of colour and flavour, high acidity and only moderate sugar content can be achieved. Comparison of the degree days indicates that there is a wide band of territory in the south-west ideally located from the temperature standpoint... the area is equivalent or better than other areas to be found in the present quality wine districts of Australia or California."

Olmo's research was expanded upon in 1965 and 1966, with two reports by Senior Lecturer in Agronomy at the University of Western Australia, Dr John Gladstones. The first of these examined the suitability of Australia's south-west for viticulture, while the second focused solely on the Margaret River and Busselton areas and suggested Cowaramup-Bramley and Witchcliffe-Forest Grove as suitable localities for grape growing.





Brothers JR and David Hohnen with friends David Sands and David Paterson (Giles Hohnen had been pushed out and only his feet are visible)

PIONEER PLANTINGS IN MARGARET RIVER

The Margaret River area struggled in the 1960s and 1970s, dependent on dairy farming and timber, while frequented by alternative lifestylers who were drawn to the impressive coastline. The locals were keen to diversify into industries such as potatoes and pine plantations and some were open to the lure of viticulture. Gladstones' scientific papers proved to be the catalyst for commercial planting and led to Tom Cullity and Bill Pannell spending endless weekends scouring the region looking for the ideal plot, eventually planting Vasse Felix (1967) and Moss Wood (1969).

Gladstones had already advised Kevin and Diana Cullen to plant grapes rather than lupins and Kevin and Tom Cullity spent a weekend in May 1966 discussing the possibilities of their involvement in viticulture in the area. This led to Kevin Cullen calling a public meeting in July 1966, at which Gladstones addressed about a hundred interested locals, generating further interest in viticulture. Cape Mentelle planted vines in 1970, Cullen Wines (1971), Sandalford (1972), Leeuwin Estate, Woodlands and Wrights (1973).

By 1980 there were 20 vineyards operating in the area. The surprising quality of the wines produced in the early days, alongside successes in the Perth Wine Show, meant the fledgling industry attracted plenty of local attention.

EARLY INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS

The game changer was the Cape Mentelle Cabernet Sauvignon winning Australia's most prestigious wine trophy, the Jimmy Watson Medal, at the 1983 Melbourne Show with their 1982 vintage. The 1983 vintage repeated that feat. This brought the Margaret River Wine Region onto the radar of wine lovers in the Australia's eastern states and overseas.

At a similar time, London-based wine magazine, Decanter, held an international Chardonnay tasting in which the 1981 Leeuwin Estate 'Art Series' Chardonnay was the highest rated wine. This vindicated two bold decisions that Leeuwin Estate had made: they released the Chardonnay at - *an unheard of* - five years of age and priced the wine at the pinnacle of Australian Chardonnay production. The international attention further cemented Margaret River's reputation.



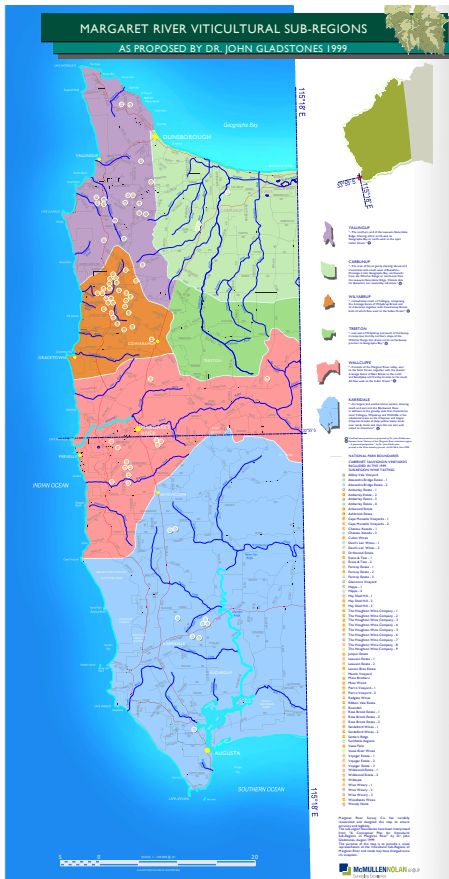
Dr Tom Cullity pictured with the first vines at Vasse Felix in 1967

MARGARET RIVER WINE GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATOR

A small group of vigneron began the Margaret River Grape Growers & Winemakers Association in the mid-1970s and it became incorporated as the Margaret River Wine Association in 1982.

An experimental appellation system run by the Western Australian Department of Agriculture operated with up to 14 volunteer wineries for about a decade from 1978, but ultimately failed. In 1994, the Federal Government legislated for the introduction of Geographical Indicators, establishing regional boundaries for all Australian wine regions. Dr John Gladstones responded to industry requests and offered a set of recommendations for delineating the Margaret River Wine Region in June 1994. His proposal was accepted and, in 1996, Margaret River became one of the first three wine regions in Australia to have its boundaries legally defined and entered in the Register of Protected Names.

In 1999, Dr John Gladstones presented a paper suggesting the potential to divide Margaret River into six sub-regions based on climate and soil differences. These unofficial areas are Yallingup, Carburnup, Wilyabrup, Treeton, Wallcliffe and Karridale.



In the absence of official, vetted sub-regions, these localities are sometimes used to provide context and a point of reference with consumers and wine industry trade representatives. Although the term 'sub-region' is often used in these scenarios, it is important to recognise that to date the six areas proposed by Gladstones have not been scientifically verified as GI's or approved by government.

In 2017, a group of five wineries made an application to Wine Australia's Geographical Indication Committee for the determination of the region 'Wilyabrup' as a Geographical Indication. In 2020 the Committee decided not to make a final determination, citing the fact that there was still no agreement on the exact boundaries or attributes of the proposed Wilyabrup region.

Read more via [Wine Australia](#).



Dr Gladstones

Fast Facts

WHAT IS THE GLADSTONES LINE?

Dr John Gladstones AO has a line of longitude named after him. The Gladstones Line runs north to south at longitude 115°18'E, just west of Busselton to form the eastern boundary of the designated Margaret River Wine Region Geographical Indicator (GI).

CONTINUING TO PUT SCIENCE FIRST

Margaret River sets itself apart from most world wine regions in that it was built on the foundation of scientific endorsement. The uniqueness of an industry born in this way can only be strengthened by continual investigation into the relationship between location and local wine attributes.

A great body of work has been carried out over the past 50 years to profile the soils and climate of the Margaret River region. However, these projects led by independent researchers, government departments and industry bodies had largely remained disconnected from one another and were not readily available to the layperson.

In 2018, the Margaret River Wine Association formed a sub-committee to work closely with the *Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD)* to commence an exciting collaborative project. The remit of the "Margaret River Provenance Project" is to further understand and define the region, an objective being achieved via the appraisal of existing literature alongside a number of key research initiatives. To date, the Technical sub-committee has achieved the following outcomes:

- The Climate and Soils Of Margaret River Report, in partnership with DPIRD
- Statistical Analysis of Soil & Climate Data, in partnership with CSIRO
- Sensory analysis by Pivot Profile Method on 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon, in partnership with DPIRD and AWRI
- Sensory analysis by Pivot Profile Method on 2021 Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon in partnership with DPIRD and AWRI
- Sensory analysis by Pivot Profile Method on 2022 Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. This time with standardised small batch winemaking by DPIRD

The use of science, innovation and technology continue to be a driving force for the Margaret River region, as the industry strives towards a greater and more rigorous interpretation of the influence of environment on wine. This is particularly relevant to the sustainability story which is rapidly becoming a pillar of the region's production ethics and management systems.

One learning that has been acquired is that at this point we do not have sufficient empirical evidence to determine whether 'sub-regions' are a valid consideration for the GI.

It is our hope to uncover more of the region's secrets and their link with our compelling fine wine offering.

Fast Facts

1955	Harold Olmo, Professor of Viticulture, University of California, recommends planting wine grapes in Australia's south-west.
1966	Dr John Gladstones, Agronomist, University of Western Australia, identifies viticulture potential of Margaret River / Vasse areas.
1967	Dr Tom Cullity plants the first modern commercial vineyard at Vasse Felix. The original Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec plantings still grow today.
1976	The region's first Chardonnay vines are planted at Leeuwin Estate, Cullen Wines and Moss Wood.
1983-84	Margaret River's reputation for fine Cabernet Sauvignon is cemented when Cape Mentelle wins back-to-back Jimmy Watson Trophies at the Melbourne Wine Show.
	International acclaim arrives when Leeuwin Estate's 1981 Art Series is named "Best Chardonnay in the World" by Decanter magazine.
1996	The Geographical Indication (GI) Margaret River is registered.
2002	The first regional Margaret River Wine Show was held with 356 entries.
2017	Margaret River Wine Region celebrates 50 years.
Today	The region continues to grow its international reputation for producing world-class fine wine.





“Margaret River is a new classic. 50 years is a very compressed history, but it has been shockingly successful.”

Andrew Caillard MW

FIFTY YEARS

The Margaret River Wine Region celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2017. At the time, there were 164 wine producers. To mark the occasion, the most significant wine tasting ever held in Margaret River was organised by the Wine Association and featured a selection of 34 wines ranging from the 1983 through to 2016 vintage, curated by leading winemakers to reflect the heritage and the future of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay.

The event was attended by over 60 guests and led by a panel featuring Jancis Robinson OBE MW, James Halliday AM, Andrew Caillard MW and Virginia Willcock (Vasse Felix). In summarising the first fifty years of Margaret River winemaking, Jancis Robinson said, “I think what most impressed me overall was the age-ability of the wines. It was a real joy to taste these two wines from the 80s.”

A video of the event can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7Kp7K28Ow8

A celebratory 'time capsule' wine was also made from the fiftieth vintage, with a selection of Margaret River's esteemed producers contributing a small sample of their best single vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon from the 2017 vintage for the special edition wine.

Sources

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