

Distinct Heritage Clones

At the heart of Margaret River's world-renowned Cabernet Sauvignons and Chardonnays are two Western Australian heritage clones, each with distinct genomes and mysterious histories. Interestingly, both the Gingin (Chardonnay) and Houghton (Cabernet Sauvignon) clones have attributes that at different points in their history saw them considered less than ideal. However, the modern success of Gingin and Houghton clones in Margaret River reflects their absolute suitability to the region's climate and soils. Both clones share common characteristics of small berries, bunches and low yields. The fruit is of exceptional quality and embodies Margaret River's defining wine characteristics of elegance and power.

GINGIN CLONE (CHARDONNAY)

The Gingin clone of Chardonnay is ubiquitous with Margaret River, representing a major portion of Chardonnay plantings in the region. It is known for its small bunches and its 'hen and chicken' berries (millerandage). Gingin grapes are intense, concentrated in fruit power and typically retain high natural acidity. This clone has a modern heritage that began in Western Australia, with recent research confirming Gingin's unique genomic sequence.

HERITAGE

The clone was originally imported into Western Australia in 1957 by the Department of Agriculture from the University of California Davis. 24 canes of "Pinot Chardonnay" were imported, allegedly as a disease indicator vine, with the transaction thought to have been overseen by Dr Harold Olmo, who had visited Western Australia in 1955 to provide viticulture recommendations to the industry.

The vines were planted at the WA Department of Agriculture's Swan Valley Research Station, and eventually supplied to a vineyard in the Swan Valley and another in Gingin (located north of Perth), called Moondah Brook Vineyard (formerly Valencia Wines). Cuttings from this vineyard were supplied to vineyards at Leeuwin Estate, Moss Wood and Cullen Wines in 1976 and subsequent vineyards in 1978.

As Margaret River Chardonnay grew more prolific in its global reputation, the clone's genetic heritage became a well-debated mystery, often thought to be the same as Mendoza. In 2018, the Australian Wine Research Institute completed genetic sequencing that proved the clones have a shared heritage, likely via "Chardonnay-1" a clone in an old Californian source block at the University of California, Davis, where Chardonnay diseases were being researched. Despite their

shared origins, Gingin and Mendoza are as distinct from each other as they are from any of the other clonal selections of Chardonnay.

A prominent viticultural characteristic of the Gingin clone is poor fruitset which leads to 'hen and chicken' (or millerandage) where loose bunches exhibit a combination of both large and, often many, smaller berries ranging from peppercorn to marbles in size.

GINGIN CLONE CHARACTERISTICS

The Gingin clone vine vigour is moderate, bunches are usually smaller, around 70 to 100 grams which typically offer much more fruit concentration than other Chardonnay clones. Bunches ripen slowly and retain flavour and natural grape acid which is an asset. The clone requires less winemaking influence to build weight which allows the pure fruit flavours of the vineyard to be retained. Gingin produces a great intensity of fruit and maintains wonderful acidity and elegance. While Chardonnay styles are often influenced by winemaking intent, generosity of flavour is the hallmark of Gingin clone Chardonnay grown in Margaret River.





HOUGHTON CLONE (CABERNET SAUVIGNON)

Many of Margaret River's finest Cabernets are made with the Houghton clone. It is a heritage clone, unique to Western Australia, that has become the preferred Cabernet Sauvignon clone of many Margaret River vintners for its ability to ripen grapes with a superb balance of blackcurrant, berry and cassis flavours, impeccable structure and resolved tannins. Houghton clone-based wines are synonymous with Margaret River's universally distinct Cabernet Sauvignon descriptor of 'power and elegance'.

HERITAGE

The original Cabernet Sauvignon vines that became the Houghton clones were introduced to Western Australia between 1836 and 1895. The exact arrival remains a mystery, however local folklore suggests possible South African origins.

Cabernet Sauvignon remained an insignificant variety in Western Australia until the 1930s. Plantings were limited because of the low bearing nature of the variety. In the 1930s the Houghton Vineyard (Swan Valley) took cuttings from old bush vines in Middle Swan to establish a 1.6 hectare planting known as the 'Houghton Cabernet block'. Although the vigour, yield and winemaking qualities varied across this block, one of Western Australia's most legendary winemakers, Jack Mann, was adamant that grapes from the block could be used to make outstanding wines.

This plot eventually became the source block for the first Cabernet Sauvignon planted in the Margaret River region in 1967 in the Vasse Felix vineyard, followed by plantings at Moss Wood (1969), Cape Mentelle (1970) and other pioneer properties.

From 1976 to the late 1990s, the Houghton clone diminished in popularity as dominant South Australian clone SAI26 became favoured. This clone is generally considered to be higher yielding, producing aromatic Cabernet Sauvignon that can be lighter in palate weight and may show pronounced leafy, herbaceous characters unless fully ripe.

In the late 1990s, at the request of the Western Australian Wine Industry, the State's Department of Agriculture re-established research into the viticultural and wine quality traits of several Houghton clone cuttings sourced from the Margaret River, Swan Valley and Great Southern Wine Regions. The favourable results from blind sensory tastings, led to a new generation of Houghton clone prominence for planting and re-planting in Margaret River.

HOUGHTON CLONE CHARACTERISTICS

Houghton clone Cabernet often displays lower vigour vines, lower yields and smaller berries. It produces wines with ripe skin and seed tannins, medium to full weight and great intensity. It generally displays less herbaceous characters and a lovely density with classic, blackcurrant and cassis characters and demonstrates that 'power and elegance' are not necessarily mutually exclusive.