

MÉTHODE TASMANOISE: PRISTINE BEAUTY IN BUBBLES

It's a mere three decades since Tasmania's potential for sparkling wine was identified, but the cool, remote island is now acknowledged as being among the finest locations for traditional-method fizz production in the Southern Hemisphere. Anne Krebiehl MW takes a tour of this cool-climate hotspot in the Southern Ocean, and meets the Champagne-inspired producers now developing their own style of sparkling wines—wines that are as fresh and vivid as the island's famously clean air

Windswept, remote, and totally brisk, the island of Tasmania seems almost like an antithesis of the Australian mainland. Surrounded by the cold, deep waters of the Southern Ocean, there is nothing but sea between it and Antarctica. For decades, the weather station at Cape Grim on its northwestern edge has measured the cleanest air in the world. Yes, "Tassie" is as clean, as fresh, as vivid as the wines that originate there. It is among not just Australia's but the world's best regions for making quality sparkling wine. In a documentary film commissioned by the Australian Department of Agriculture in 1985 on the then-fledgling wine industry of Tasmania, a prophetic voice-over intoned, "Tasmanian vignerons believe that their state will one day be the most highly regarded wine region in the country."¹ While the film now seems quaint and dated, its implications were fully realized. Today, Tasmanian grapes are highly prized—and none more so than those grown to make traditional-method sparkling wine.

Slightly smaller than Ireland, Tasmania has just over half a million inhabitants. Almost half of its surface is designated as nature reserve or national park, especially the rainforests of the weather-beaten west coast. Tasmania's east and west, north and south are markedly different; the island can seem both thrillingly wild and touchingly pastoral. Its rugged 3,033-mile (4,880km) coastline is home to colonies of penguins, numerous lighthouses, and inviting beaches. Its 4,646 acres (1,880ha) of vineyards are concentrated in the valleys of the north and south and on the drier east coast. Wine Tasmania reports that the island's "total wine production represents less than 0.5 percent of the total national wine grape production but 10 percent of the premium wine segment."² It also notes that "all Tasmanian wine

produced is in the niche premium wine sector retailing above \$15 equivalent. This segment represents just 7 percent of Australia's total wine production, but 28 percent of its value."

While there are numerous instances of 19th-century viticulture in Tasmania, even of sparkling-wine production, none of the plantings survived.³ It was not until the late 1960s and mid-1970s that Tasmania was rediscovered for viticulture, and another decade before the potential for sparkling wine was crystallized. While grapes for sparkling wines are sourced from across the island, the northerly regions of Tamar Valley and Pipers River stand out. This is where I meet one of Tasmania's 20th-century pioneers, Dr Andrew Pirie. It was a delicious sip of NV Pirie Sparkling (now made and owned by Brown Brothers) in 2015, and an equally fine sip of Apogee 2012 a year later at a merchant's tasting in London, that set me off on this inquiry. Apogee is Dr Andrew Pirie's current project. The vineyard is easy to miss. There is just a small wooden sign by the road, in deep Pipers River countryside roughly 40 minutes' drive northwest from Launceston, toward the Bass Strait. Pirie bought the property 11 years ago with the aim of making the best sparkling wine he could. He is a central figure in Tasmanian viticulture and sparkling wine, and Apogee is the culmination of everything this inquisitive scientist has come to understand about Tasmania, climate, soil, and winemaking in the course of his life. "This is the last vineyard that I'll do, and I want to do the very best," he says. "The aim here is to recreate a grand cru site; everything is very small, very handmade, very detailed, with lots of knowledge." Indeed, he hand-riddles and hand-disgorges every single bottle. "It's very garagiste," he says.

He makes only vintage-dated wines. His first release was the 2010 vintage. On his 5-acre (2ha) single vineyard, he grows Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and a small amount of Pinot Meunier

Photography courtesy of Wine Australia



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and Pinot Gris, all of which go into the Apogee wine even though a still wine is also made from the Pinot Gris. The Pinot Noir grows on the driest side of the vineyard. Everything is thought through. “I came back from France 40 years ago and thought that close planting was going to be key to quality. It turned out that was wrong. In this climate we now know that with 5,000 vines per hectare you get too much vigor, which is the opposite of what you expect. Close planting does not work on these soils, but that’s another story.” He also has a very high canopy in a Scott Henry trellis. “The result is that the fruit is quite exposed; I don’t do leaf plucking, but you get very ripe fruit.” Indeed, the flavors are of red rather than green apple and even stretch to stone fruit—but Pirie does that to ward off possible green flavors. “This system produces ripe fruit in a very cool climate; it is cool, we are not harvesting until the April 1 for sparkling. One cane is trained upward, the other downward, naturally reducing vigor. “But the most important thing is that it creates a window in the middle that is aerated. This vineyard gets no botrytis.” He also makes an utterly creamy rosé, vivid with Red Delicious fruit.

Pirie studied general agriculture at Sydney University but had a hankering to go to Europe. A viticulture lecturer introduced him to John Avery of Avery’s in Bristol and this led the young Pirie onto a “circuit that included Sichel in Bordeaux and Hugel in Alsace” in the early 1970s. It acquainted Pirie with a very different style of wine, with more aroma and delicacy, at a time when Australian viticulture was still heavily geared toward fortified wines from warm, dry regions. It set Pirie thinking: “I was fascinated,” he recalls, “not just by the cool climate but by the grand cru sites of northern France. I could see how valuable they were, and I thought that if I could

discover the same sort of country in a new region, I could buy cheap land and make great wine. My training was partly in climatology, so I had the tools—albeit primitive in those days—that led me fairly quickly to Tasmania.” Officially, Tasmania was still considered then too cold for viticulture. But Pirie had the courage of his convictions: “I did sufficient work on the climate to start looking at Tasmania. I looked at more detailed factors like rainfall, reliability of rainfall, and evaporation, which led me into this region. There was another cool climate: I was also looking at the higher parts around Canberra. It’s very different from Tasmania, yet it is the same temperature, so there was a bit of a conundrum, but I thought I should choose a region where most factors are similar to France. Canberra was cool and dry, and Tasmania was cool and humid, so I chose Tasmania. I used a template of French regions for this climate. I looked at sunshine strength, and it seemed Tasmania was actually not only able to ripen grapes but probably able to ripen them well, based on other parameters. That’s how I eventually came here.” The label “pioneer” does not sit easily with Pirie: “Actually, that’s still happening; it’s a big story. If we go back to the 1970s, climate science was still a lot more shaky, the thinking was fairly rough: I was thinking about Alsace, Burgundy, Bordeaux all in one breath. Now we don’t do that. But then that was cool climate against Australia, which was considered very much a warm climate, a fortified producer. Grapes like Pinot Noir and Chardonnay just weren’t really there. I was showing interest in cool climate at a time when nobody was really interested.”

Previous spread: Pipers Brook Vineyard and Jansz, now owned by the Hill-Smiths. Above: Dr Andrew Pirie of Apogee inspecting some of his fruit in the 2016 vintage.

Photography courtesy of Apogee

If it was climate that took Pirie to Tasmania, what about its soils? “This is where you have to go back to your learning and understand how soil is working. Again, there are myths,” he cautions. “Soil is a regulator of moisture. The perfect soil depends on the atmospheric environment of the vine because the soil has to give the right amount of water that the environment demands. If you understand that, you don’t get obsessed by limestone. You look for moisture characteristics like drainage and retention. So, this soil here is ferrosol; this is light, not too rich in moisture. If you have iron and clay together, the clay becomes very granular and drains very well. So, the secret of these soils is probably the iron content, but for the physical not the chemical aspect.”

It is at this point that Pirie decides to delve deep into the climatological research that backs up his thinking. Apart from running Apogee, Pirie is part of a current governmental project to identify suitable vineyard sites in Tasmania. “It’s incredible what we can do now,” he says of the climate- and soil-mapping data and resources available to him today. “We are developing these maps, and the main quest is for sparkling wine; the project is to identify the future sites for sparkling. We use temperature, rainfall, soil type, slope, and frost, and we’re getting down to great detail. We are going to publish these maps, and people will be able to go quickly to the areas. The fact that you can still buy these sites is what makes Tasmania exciting.” Pirie’s research takes humidity into account alongside temperature. It pits cool and humid against cool and dry, warm and humid against warm and dry, the central questions being, “What index do we use? What predicts ripening?” Pirie explains: “Temperature alone does not give you all of the answers. In the old days, you just used temperature.” Here he cites the growing degree days of Amerine and Winkler, according to which, regions with the same temperature should give you the same wine style—but they do not. “There’s something missing, and I’ve been working on this for many years. Finally, we’ve found an index that seems to be predictive. It’s a stress index, and in climatology terms it’s the potential of evapotranspiration minus the rainfall for the growing season of the vine.” The project has fully vindicated his beliefs, which have been formed over four decades of thinking and working. “The area for sparkling wine is substantial. There is opportunity for Tasmania to grow, and this government project is about attracting more investment.”

The right style of wine for the place

By now the project has mapped Tasmania in detail: Pirie’s map goes down to squares of 194 sq ft (18 sq m). Based on his data, Pipers River in Tasmania’s north has very similar conditions to Champagne: very close in temperature but slightly drier. “It’s good to understand and have the science now. This gives us the advantage to predict where we go next. Tasmania is lucky; we have all of these people interested in this topic, doing some very good research.” With his brother, Pirie had founded the Pipers Brook Estate in 1974 and planted Riesling, Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, and a little later Pinot Noir. Back in the 1970s, did Pirie’s cool-climate thinking include Champagne? “No, not yet—that happened almost by accident,” he says. It all became clear ten years later, in 1984, when the island had two sets of interesting visitors.

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Pirie recalls, “In 1984, Moët arrived with a senior team in Tasmania to look at the potential for sparkling wine. It was the same year that Roederer came to Tasmania to look at Heemskerk. This started to flag sparkling wine as a possibility. They were very impressed with the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from this area.” While Moët had also scouted for suitable sites on the mainland and decided to create Domaine Chandon in Victoria to take advantage of the proximity to Melbourne, Champagne Roederer formed a partnership with Heemskerk, also in Pipers River. This estate, named after the ship of the Dutch explorer Abel Janszoon Tasman, who had discovered the island in 1642, had been founded by another pioneer, Graham Wiltshire, who had been among the first to experiment with commercial vineyards in Tasmania. A towering figure in the island’s viticultural development, he died in 2014. In the 1985 documentary film, Wiltshire called the partnership “one of the most important ventures [...], that a company with the prestige of Louis Roederer should consider a little island like Tasmania [...]. Over a number of years they have been watching the Tasmanian development of the quality of our grapes and wine, and after exhaustive studies they think that Tasmania is a place where they can grow wine suitable for the name of Roederer. We have tried not to emulate but to make wines of a Tasmanian style to the same standard as the French, looking only for quality.”

The Heemskerk/Roederer joint venture, begun in 1985, bottled its first vintage in 1989, which was released under the name of Jansz in 1991. Pirie remembers, “At the time, Roederer’s sparkling-wine operation in California’s Anderson Valley was already up and running. Heemskerk was right next to Pipers Brook, and I got to know Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon. I was very interested, and in 1994 I made my first base wines. 1995 was the first Pirie Sparkling vintage, which was launched in 1999.” The wine was successful right from the start and still keeps winning international accolades, imbued as it is with a quality ethos. “It turned out we were late to produce, but when we did it turned out that we had some of the best vineyards,” Pirie says. “When we look at the mapping today, we know why. Once we made sparkling wine, it just became easy,” he says. “We made the style of wine that was right for the place.” In the meantime, the original Pipers Brook estate and brand has changed hands several times. So, too, has the Pirie Sparkling brand, which now belongs to Brown Brothers. Heemskerk is now called Jansz, which since 1997 has been owned by the Hill-Smith family. Dr Andrew Pirie has certainly witnessed a huge amount of progress and change. His hard work and input forms an integral part of it. Ever the scientist, he says, “That’s me now, having proved most of what I wanted to do. I am happy

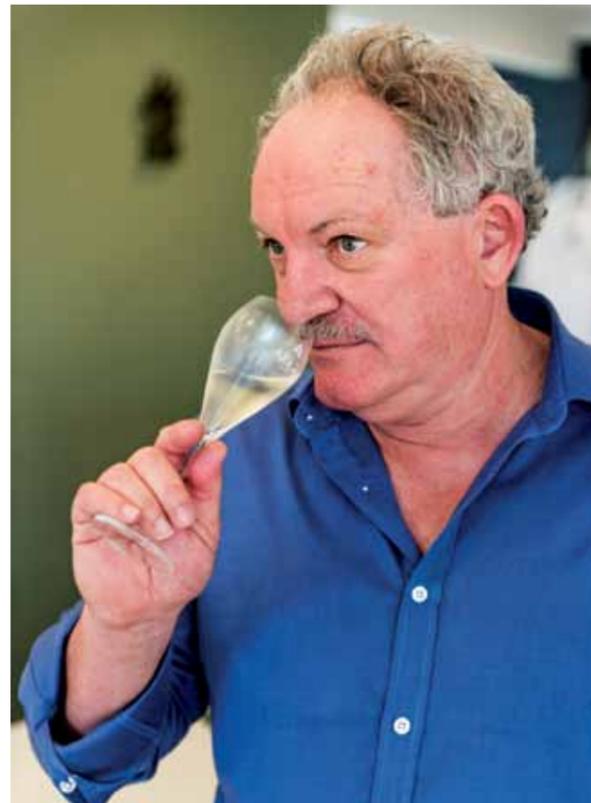
to be small here at Apogee, but I am also happy to be doing research. I hope that this will encourage more investment, and one attraction is that the land is still fairly cheap.”

Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, today *chef de cave* at Champagne Louis Roederer, arrived in Tasmania in 1990 as a young winemaker and has fond memories. “What surprised me most was the beauty and quietness of the place. It was such a remote world then, with a few wine pioneers.” He also remembers the wind: “The roaring forties were always blowing. Creating Jansz, the very first Tasmanian sparkling wine, was a great adventure. We had to invent everything, as the place was different and new. It’s been a great learning experience for me. I was coming from California, where we had done the same, so I was quite prepared. The vineyards were the clear challenge, understanding the strength of the place. I quickly realized that Pinot Noir was performing very well. It had to be the base of the blend.” He remembers all of the experimentation with canopies, planting densities, and so on as “a kind of huge ‘open sky’ laboratory where many mainland consultants were trying to find the holy grail. Trying is good, but you also have to make it consistent, which is a key to good wines. At that time, perhaps only Andrew Pirie had started to put in place a long-term vision for Tasmanian wines.” From sheer tasting experience, Lécaillon came to the same conclusion that Pirie has just proven with his climatological study. “I quickly learned the finesse of the Pipers River area. The intense and elegant expression of Tassie comes from Pinot Noir, which really performs well. It is elegant, savory, and intense, with a crisp expression but also a touch of exotic character. It’s never too big, especially in the Pipers Brook area.”

Tamar Ridge

It is the young Kiwi winemaker Tom Wallace who makes the Pirie Sparkling wines today for Brown Brothers at the Tamar Ridge estate in Rosevears. The estate was founded in 1985 by yet another Tassie winemaking legend, Joseph Chromy. In his detailed book *Tasmanian Vintage*, Tony Walker details the often labyrinthine ownership transfers of various estates. Today the NV Pirie Sparkling is mainly sourced from the White Hills vineyard at the southern end of the Tamar Valley. “It’s very cool but has marked diurnal swing. It’s a beautiful vineyard, just a hill in the middle of farmland—there’s really nothing else around there,” says Wallace. Both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay ripen “very, very late, they are about three weeks behind any other sparkling blocks, and we harvest at about 10.5–10.8° Baumé. Unusually, Chardonnay is the dominant variety. Most people in Tasmania use predominantly Pinot Noir to get a softer wine, but we really like the crisp, elegant, dry Chardonnay—it is gorgeous.”

Various styles of traditional-method sparkling are made on the island. “Tasmania is incredibly regional. The fruit is so different from so many different parts of a very small place, and you can make great sparkling from all these different parts. Having that Tasmanian cool climate, being able to pick and choose when you can harvest, that’s exciting. If you’re on the mainland, it’s 10.5° Baumé for one day, whereas we can pick at exactly the right time when we want to bring our fruit in.” The current and ravishing NV release is based on 2011 and has spent at least four years on its lees. They also started using up to 25 percent of reserve wine in that year. “Some of the reserves are in oak. It gives us real control over that savory mid-



palate. It’s something I really enjoy doing. We are building a wine with all of this autolysis, but it’s the basic elements of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay that we are trying to highlight. For all our wines, what we are really trying to create is elegance and a straight line, length.” All the fruit is hand-picked, crushed, vinified block by block, and has full malolactic conversion. The blending is also done in Tasmania, but the finished blends of the sparkling wines—there is also a much smaller production of blanc de blancs, Vintage, and rosé—are sent by tank to the mainland for *tirage*, lees aging, and disgorgement. When I ask Wallace what defines Tasmanian sparkling wine, his answer is prompt: “I think it’s the acidity that sets us apart—that’s an absolute aspect. We’re a young industry, but we’re improving pretty quickly. We’re learning a lot, and that’s exciting.”

Jansz and Delamare

At Jansz, it is Louisa Rose—one of Australia’s most impressive, inquisitive winemakers—who is in charge of sparkling wine. With huge experience in South Australia, she is very clear about Tasmania’s advantages when it comes to sparkling wines. “Coming to Tas was like a quantum leap in terms of flavor. There was more than just climate. The wines have beautiful acidity, and that also gives texture. There’s truffle, there’s a beautiful, special, earthy thing in the Pinots that we never get on the mainland, and we really like what Chardonnay does here in terms of acidity. ‘Pure’ is a term we use a lot,” she raves. The Jansz NV is made from fruit sourced from across the island, including Tamar Valley and Coal River Valley (in the south). However, all the

Ed Carr, creator of the House of Arras: “The Arras style is all about complexity, flavor persistence, and finesse, while maintaining vibrancy and freshness.”

Photography by DL Photography, courtesy of House of Arras

vintage wines are made from the original Jansz vineyard, from where you can see and smell the Bass Strait. “We do this because the wines are complete,” Rose says. They spend four to five years on lees and are delicious. My tasting note of the late-disgorged 2006 notes “a weightless aura of lemon shortbread.”

At Delamare, farther inland, two young winemakers, Fran Austin and Shane Holloway, are putting all of their energy into this 1983-established estate that they bought in 2007. Their vineyards are about 3 miles (4.5km) from the Bass Strait. “We get these cool nights,” says Holloway, “which gives us this real acid retention. We don’t really have hot summers.” They also make still Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but the direction of travel is clear: “We have ended up with such a big focus on sparkling. About 70 percent of our production this year went to sparkling, a big investment. When you do that as a small-scale business, it throws up a lot of challenges. Because we’re a young business we are also growing. So, we’re trying to lay down more wine than we are selling, and financing all of that...,” sighs Austin. “The reality is that the biggest opportunity is sparkling.” Austin explains their style: “When you consider that certainly I and, to a certain degree, Shane came to this project from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay production, where you are single-mindedly pursuing a sense of place, we sort of tried, and will continue to try, to carry this into our sparkling wines—a distinctive fruit character that we hope will persevere through secondary ferment and years of *tirage*. That is our aim. It’s quite a different approach from what a lot of premium sparkling tries to achieve.” They keep their reserve wines in used barriques but are on the lookout for *foudres*. They would like to have a reserve component of at least 30 percent in their NV wine but are struggling to hold that much back when their wines are much in demand. There is a clear sense of young people hitting their stride. Both are full of energy, full of curiosity and dynamism, talking excitedly about their plans and wines. They have a Vintage rosé and a blanc de noirs on lees, and they are trying to extend the lees aging on their premium blanc de blancs from six years to eight years. They have clearly set their sights on quality and creating exciting, individual fizz. When I ask about Tasmanian flavor, both remark on the “incredible, brilliant fruitiness alongside thrilling acidity.” “What excites us the most is that even if something is being planted today, it’s going to take a decade before it has any impact,” Holloway says. “I know what we are making today, and I know what we’ll have in the shed in ten years’ time—and that excites me.”

House of Arras

Tasmania’s eminence in the sparkling stakes was not lost on other operators, and Accolade got in on the act in 1995 to create the luxury label House of Arras, known for its rich, opulent, often oak-matured and long-aged styles. The brand is inextricably linked with its creator Ed Carr. He had joined what was then BRL Hardy in 1994 as group sparkling-wine maker but had been scouting vineyards in Tasmania since 1988. “It is hard to believe there were only some 46ha [114 acres] of bearing vines at that time,” he says. “My enthusiasm for this region was originally sparked by the pioneering work of Andrew Pirie and Roederer/Heemskirk. Being part of a large company, I was able to make sparkling wines from all the recognized cold-climate regions of Australia. From this work, we chose Tasmania as the source

region for our high-end cuvées, and this evolved to become the Arras brand. It was evident very early on that Tasmania could produce wines of great elegance and longevity, which we consider essential in producing a complex, mature, traditional method style.” The first Arras wine was made in 1998 and released in 2002. It is the long lees aging that sets the multi-award-winning House of Arras apart. “The maturation policy for the wines is quite unique in Australia and Tasmania,” Carr says. The Brut Elite ages for a minimum of four years, the Vintage wines for seven, the Blanc de Blancs for eight, and the Late Disgorged Vintage for an entire decade. Carr explains that “the Arras style is all about complexity, flavor persistence, and finesse, while maintaining vibrancy and freshness.” With his experience of making sparkling wines from other Australian regions, he says they all “express their individual terroir and high quality in their own right.” However, “Tasmania is best suited to the desired style. The cold climate from high latitude and the maritime influence are the primary drivers of quality. We work with vineyards of variable soil type, but these are all of ancient origin and naturally low fertility. The longevity of the wines has been proven over the past 20 years with both current releases and wines still on lees in the *tirage* museum. Last year we released a 20th-anniversary wine, which was from the 1998 vintage with 16 years lees age; it showed a brilliant freshness and has inspired thoughts for additional museum-type releases, because we believe the wines have the ability to age further.” But Carr also looks ahead: “There will be some further style evolution as existing vineyards age and new vineyards come into production. There are also plans for volume growth, but considering the time frame of vineyard development, combined with extensive lees maturation, this will be a continuous and slow process.”

But time is relative: This remote island has captured the imagination of many people in a single generation. There are rumors of American firms scouting for land, and as Pirie’s research attests, the potential is there. Most of the internationally distributed wines—Pirie, Jansz, and House of Arras—are still made across the Bass Strait on the mainland, where most of the infrastructure is. This island is only just taking off, and we are sure to hear a lot more of that wonderful *méthode tasmanoise*. Away from Hobart’s bustling Salamanca Market and illuminated harbor, Tasmania still seems to be all about homespun farmsteads or wild gum-tree forests. The air is so clear and fresh that you can smell the rain, the sea, the trees. The tiny oysters from its cool shores are some of the best I ever eaten, their briny tang the perfect foil for the brilliance of the sparkling wine: Every bursting bubble carries some of that pristine beauty. ■

NOTES

1. *The Tasmanian Wine Industry: Tasmanian Wines*, published by the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office. Writer: Peter Campbell; director: John Honey; producer: Peter Kay; Tasmanian Film Corporation Pty Ltd for the Department of Agriculture, 1985; available at [youtube.com/watch?v=0wB00QRI_gU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wB00QRI_gU)
2. [winetasmania.com.au/resources/downloads/Strategic_Plan_2017-19_FINAL_-_revision_June_2017.pdf](https://www.winetasmania.com.au/resources/downloads/Strategic_Plan_2017-19_FINAL_-_revision_June_2017.pdf)
3. Tony Walker, *Vintage Tasmania* (Providore Island Tasmania, 2014).