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Painting a new picture of McLaren Vale wines

Kate Washington visits husband and wife winemaking team Toby and Emmanuelle Bekkers. Photographs by **Grant Beed**.



In 1998 the Art Gallery of South Australia presented art works depicting the Fleurieu, entitled 'The Painted Coast: views of the Fleurieu Peninsula coast of South Australia.' In various styles and media, the artists captured the region's rolling hills, lush vines by the sea and warm coastal light. The title of the exhibit aptly describes the beauty of the landscape adored by locals and coveted by visitors.

We now find on this painted landscape a new opportunity for another kind of artistic impression – winemaking. In speaking with local-based wine couple, Toby and Emmanuelle Bekkers, we quickly realise that like the colours available in the artist's palette, the winemaker's palate can also experience wondrous abandon in the possibilities produced by the region's terroir.

For the first time, the Bekkers have brought together the full scope of their professional expertise and creative talent in the wine industry to impress upon the canvas a new and more contemporary picture for high-end wines from the McLaren Vale.

The couple has created the first instalment of BEKKERS Fine Wine of Australia. The family-run company blends Toby's understanding of McLaren Vale's soils, geology and climate with Emmanuelle's

extensive winemaking career in Australia and France. The 2011 vintage is their first release from this new palette, influenced by their wine knowledge and skills developed both here and in Europe.

The Bekkers' winemaking philosophy is that good wines require careful viticulture, targeted vineyard selection, followed by a gentleness and respect of the fruit in the winery. In their first release label, BEKKERS 2011 McLaren Vale Syrah they feel that through this approach the fruit is able speak for itself.

Importantly, this small-batch vintage (less than 150 dozen produced) shows that McLaren Vale has high quality fruit and the right people to produce world-class wines. This label is born of patience and perseverance and shows that the Bekkers want to deliver only a top quality product. Toby says, 'We have been fortunate to see the best that the world of wine can offer in France. Access to some of the world's greatest wine estates greatly influences our commitment to attention to detail.'

He continues, 'However, nothing I have seen elsewhere has diminished my conviction that McLaren Vale can produce wines of equal quality. To be recognised as such, every region needs a few

emblematic wines. Not everyone can operate at this price point, but having one or two in the region is extremely important.'

Emmanuelle, or Emma, as she is called by friends and family, grew up in Toulon, France, on the Mediterranean coast. She completed a degree in Oenology at the University of Montpellier, in addition to a degree in Biology at the University of Marseille. She worked for La Domaine de la Baume (then part of the Hardy Wine Company) in the south of France, which led to her first vintage in Australia in 1995 at Hardy's Tintara – and a chance meeting with Toby.

Following on from Tintara, Emma took a winemaking position at Hardy's Reynella, and later, as winery manager and senior winemaker at Langhorne Creek and Boar's Rock. She has been the winemaker at McLaren Vale's Chalk Hill since 2001 and runs her own winemaking consultancy business – Oenologie Requin (www.oenologie-requin.com).

During the Australian winter Emma returned to France working vintages in Burgundy, Bordeaux and Languedoc Rousillon, further honing her skills. During this peripatetic time she developed her own characteristic style, producing wines with refined texture, restraint and delicacy.

Emma's light hand and minimalist approach is reminiscent of a style more familiar in Europe, yet with a place in the Australian context. The challenge, says Emma, is 'minimal intervention but constant and careful monitoring of the fruit in fermentation.' She insists that, 'Doing nothing,' which is sometimes the most necessary approach, 'is the hardest thing to do'.

The Bekkers apply the French word Syrah (Shiraz) on their label. They feel it best represents the wine style – that is, McLaren Vale intensity coupled with delicate aromas, flavours and a fine, silky texture. It also serves as recognition of Emma's heritage.

Such vast experience on the Fleurieu has imparted to Emma a deep understanding of the flavour profiles found across the Peninsula. This insight, coupled with the knowledge Toby has amassed planting and managing vineyards across Australia, is a winning formula for the couple's first foray into fine wine making.

Toby was born and bred on the Fleurieu. While attending Willunga High School, he spent his afternoons and weekends as any other teenager – surfing, fishing and generally immersed in coastal living. He completed his Agricultural Science degree at the University of Adelaide (Roseworthy campus) and an Honours degree in Viticulture at the Waite Institute.

These globally-recognised institutions have produced a number of well-known figures working in the South Australian wine industry. And why do those born and trained in the Adelaide and Fleurieu regions choose to stay and work here?

According to Toby, McLaren Vale's strength is in its diversity and quality of fruit. Furthermore, he adds, 'It seems to me that most people become de-sensitised to the beauty of their home region. McLaren Vale is a paradise and it is worth taking the time to consider just how special [it] and the Fleurieu are.'

Until 2010 Bekkers was responsible for over 700 acres of vineyards in his role as General Manager and Senior Viticulturalist for Paxton

Wines. His guiding influence in bringing 'natural viticulture' to the region was bred out of an interest in uncovering hidden grape and wine quality through non-invasive techniques, not only in the vineyard but also the winery.

Toby's philosophy is that great wine starts from exceptional detail in the vineyard and it is to this objective that he runs an expanding consultancy in organic and biodynamic practices (www.tobybekkers.com). Bekkers also reveals that 'to be a good viticulturalist you need to understand the winemaking process'.

McLaren Vale not only provides a unique geological expression, soil profile and climate for growing grapes, but also a great environment for raising a family.

Emma said during her first vintage in McLaren Vale she instantly had the conviction that this was somewhere she could live. She attributed the initial source of this comfort to the coast, admitting it made her nostalgic for her own home region.

Although enjoying their lifestyle, they still feel the pull back to France, to keep up connections with their network of esteemed winemakers and friends. Their children are bilingual and this young family confirms how a relationship borne out of a vintage romance and spanning two continents can breathe new life and passion into the wine industry.

Toby explains, 'McLaren Vale dominates the label in deference to the importance of provenance, and my aspiration is for both McLaren Vale and BEKKERS to stand proud amid the world's most coveted wines and their craftsmen'.

When speaking with this highly skilled and passionate couple about why they decided to dabble at the top end, you get the feeling it is just simply something they ought to be doing. It does not take an artistic eye to appreciate that the Bekkers are making their own small, but very important impression on the palette of the painted coast. 



Far left: The Bekkers family on their vineyard. Above: Bekkers 2011 McLaren Vale Syrah.