

we've had ... for winemakers it's the oxygen we need to keep trying to do better. It's been successful for the brands we make (Pete made the Jimmy Watson winning '99 Spartacus for Punter's Corner) and if you look at Wynns who built a small lot cellar a few years ago, the wines they've been producing lately, especially this year, have really jumped up a notch and the recognition that Sue Hodder and Allen Jenkins have had, including winning this year's *Gourmet Traveller* Winemaker of the Year award, is testament to better handling of those small lots of really good fruit."

Peter began winemaking in 1981 as part of his honours thesis, looking at colour extraction in Pinot Noir in Canterbury, New Zealand. He then spent a year and a half in France working as assistant oenologist for A. Moueix et Fils in Libourne, before completing a graduate diploma of winemaking at Roseworthy in 1988. The following year he joined Pete Douglas at Wynns. He spent the 1990 vintage in the Rhône and worked as a flying winemaker for Penfolds in Russia in 1993 and for Penfolds' Laperouse project in the south of France in 1994. Numerous trips to Bordeaux followed.

So it's no surprise Balnaves wines are influenced by French winemaking. "One thing I picked up from Bordeaux is that structure and balance are more important than any particular flavour you might see in the wine," Peter says. "I learnt a lot of those Bordeaux techniques like long maceration and tannin development. Wynns' philosophy was similar in that they were looking for structure and tannin richness, they were doing long macerations but it was more about adding tannin and creating that tannin structure. When I came to Balnaves we started doing more time on skins and making wines with a more obvious tannin structure. When you taste our wines you get the flavour but also the mouthfeel and texture from the tannin structure. I would call it a mid-Atlantic style, more European than a typical Australian wine but more Australian than European wines – it's a bit more complex structured and tannic than typically what most Australian winemakers would aim for, but still has more mid palate sweetness than most European wines would have – well, *did* have, it's changing. Time on skins is important as is the way we do our macerations, we have a fairly rigorous

extraction process, making sure we get the tannins out that we want."

A hallmark of Balnaves is consistency. Peter puts it down to sticking to the knitting. "I think we just knew what we were trying to do and stuck at it, not reacting too much to trends such as the boom in Shiraz and Merlot, we really stuck to focusing on medium bodied, balanced Cabernet. Shiraz is always good out of Coonawarra but it's medium bodied of course. Actually we probably don't get the recognition for Shiraz that comes out of the region we should, but having said that the '08 Lindeman's Limestone Ridge Shiraz Cabernet won two trophies in Adelaide and six at the Limestone Coast Wine Show."

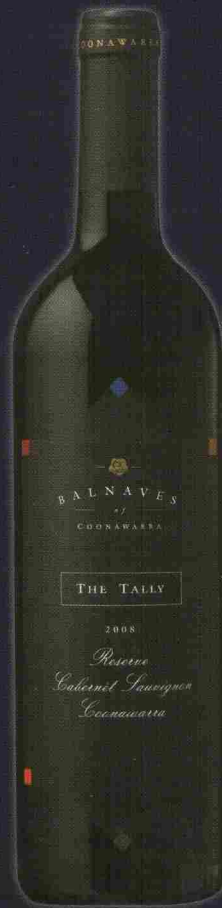
Peter has resisted the temptation to start his own label, although he has a "weekend job" – a little vineyard in Wrattontully. "I sell fruit to Penfolds at Nuriootpa and some to Parker Estate, which actually comes into here," he says. "Maybe one day, but right now the world doesn't need another label. I've got friends who have started labels and are doing a good job, but I think they're surprised at how difficult it is even though they've been in the wine industry for a long time."

Seal of approval

Most Balnaves wines are under screwcap but the Cabernet Sauvignon (\$35) and The Tally (\$90) are sealed with ProCork. "If you look at the results of the AWRI Closure Trial it's the top performing closure, it doesn't have the issues of reduction screwcaps can have, but it has the highest sulphur dioxide retention of any closure and it doesn't have any problems with TCA," Balnaves winemaker Pete Bissell said.

"It allows you to have a cork without the problems of cork. Even if you have corks that don't have TCA you'll still end up with 12 different wines after 12 months because they all let different amounts of oxygen into the bottle. The membranes on a ProCork regulate the amount of oxygen going into the bottle, so you get more consistency – a development that sits somewhere between a screwcap and a very good natural cork. A screwcap will always retain much more of that brighter, fresher fruit much longer than a cork, but a screwcap will also slow down the integration of the tannin on the palate and they can look quite linear for longer.

"A ProCork allows faster tannin integration – not as much as cork but faster than screwcap and it also retains some of that brighter, fresher fruit. So with our Cabernet and The Tally we've decided to go with ProCork partly because the style of wine we're making needs more air than you get under a screwcap. We look at it every year and ask ourselves if we are doing the right thing, but we've been under ProCork since 2005 and are still happy with what we're seeing."



Peter admits he's had plenty of offers from head-hunters. "When you're doing well you always get approaches including from overseas, but I'm not interested in chasing super high paid jobs because you get away from making wine and it becomes a people managing role – a palate that rushes in and looks at everything and makes a few decisions and races off to the next job. I'm more suited to having a quiet space to think about what I'm doing and have the odd new idea pop into my head. I do a bit of meditating which also helps. The Balnaves are good people, they're all hard workers and have a team approach. If anything needs to be done everyone turns up and lends a hand and the tornado that hit Penola recently was a good case in point. The day after, my wife and I wandered over to see what the damage was and here were all the Balnaves trucks being loaded up with rubbish – that's the sort of community I like. A get-in-and-get-things-done attitude. Doug and Annette are good at spotting potential in people and allowing them to show their talent. They did that with Karin Seja who designed our labels and they've let me get on with it too. There's a lot to be said for that in family business."