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## Xabregas looks for balance as all the elements come together

WITH a trophy cabinet full of medals and their sights set on capitalising on another vintage, a new release wine comes at an interesting time for Mount Barker winery, Xabregas.

Xabregas, which began in 1996 as a joint venture between Perth stockbroking partners Terry Hogan and Eve Broadley, now comprises three vineyards across 120 hectares.

Site selection just south of Mount Barker was heavily influenced by Dr John Gladstone's seminal work into viticulture and environmental systems in Western Australia. Current plantings at Xabregas include riesling, sauvignon blanc, cabernet franc and merlot.

Wine production began slowly – about 2,800 cases initially – but gradually this has swelled, with 12,000 cases bottled in 2005.

Along the way, Xabregas's fruit has found its way into wineries such as Houghton, Howard Park and Forrest Hill.

But things really gathered pace when the Hogan-Broadley partnership became major shareholders in the Premium Porongurup Winery in 2004. This brought together some of the best fruit in Mount Barker and the skills of acclaimed chief winemaker Dr Diane Miller.

Dr Miller, a veterinarian by trade before the lure of the grape proved too strong, oversees the processing of 650 tonnes of fruit per vintage, roughly 450,000 litres of wine.

The winery, which is situated near the Porongurup Ranges, exemplifies all of the promise of 'new world' winemaking. It gleams with shiny stainless steel fermenters, and is

stocked with the most technologically advanced viticultural equipment currently available.

In a word, it is sleek.

And it wasn't long before Xabregas found its mark on the local wine scene. From the stunning 2002 vintage in Mount Barker, its merlot, shiraz and cabernet all won medals at WA wine awards – the cabernet being judged the gold medal winner at the 2003 Qantas Wine Show.

More recently, however, the 2004 Show Reserve cabernet won silver at wine shows in WA and Sydney. But it has been the success of the 2004 Show Reserve Shiraz that has most pleased Dr Miller.

The wine was a trophy and gold medal winner at the 2005 Mount Barker wine show and received silver in the Royal Sydney Wine Show as well. Now, a Show Reserve chardonnay has joined the ranks and is set to extend the benchmark for the variety in Mount Barker.

But the wine had a very interesting, if not off-beat, beginning. As Dr Miller recalls a conversation she had with Mr Hogan one day about the particularly excellent chardonnay fruit she was getting from 2005: "I said to Terry, 'wouldn't it be great if we had some oak to age it in?' Two days later I got a phone call to say that all of these French oak barrels were arriving," she says.

And they weren't just any French barrels but Tronçais French oak, some of the most expensive and sought after oak in France, famed for possessing the tightest grain structure possible.

"It was really incredible," Dr Miller says.

"We got such good fruit from 2005 but with the chardonnay we picked at night, crushed the fruit and stirred it once a week for six months. The result is a creaminess on the palate that really contributes to excellent mouth feel.

"Given the fruit we had was so exceptional, it could stand up to more intense oak."

Now bottled, only 550 cases of the recently released wine were made; and it marks an exciting time for the winery.

"With the wines, I really try to strike a balance. We've been so lucky for the last three years with such great seasons," Dr Miller says.

But as this year's vintage rapidly approaches, comparisons are quickly made with last vintage.

Dr Miller echoes the concerns of a number of South West growers about the late ripening of some of their wines. Some varieties, particularly the reds, are four weeks behind ripening where they would have been last year.

And WA's cyclonic weather this season has dumped late rain on vineyards, raising concerns about disease.

But of course wine is often the best example of the adage that nature has a way of balancing itself out, because while cooler temperatures may delay ripening, they are beneficial for flavour development.

Nevertheless, Dr Miller believes this year will serve Mount Barker chardonnay well, with the next few weeks crucial for all of the red varieties.



Andrew Bennett



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**WINNING DEVELOPMENT:** Mt Barker-based Xabregas currently has riesling, sauvignon blanc, cabernet franc and merlot on the vine and is looking to build on the success of its recent medal winning offerings. *Photo: Tim van Bronswijk*