



## LEEUWIN ESTATE CHARDONNAY

Since the 1980 vintage Leeuwin Estate has adhered to vertical training and leaf removal to present the Chardonnay fruit properly to the light. The soil management has remained the same since inception, without the use of artificial fertilizers. Variations and deficiencies in the soils of individual blocks have not been completely corrected so that the wines reflect the soil wherever possible.

Leeuwin Estate has sixty-two acres of Chardonnay vines divided into eight distinct parcels. The soil and slopes of the plantings differ in each area and the cultural aspects of the viticulture are tailored to each parcel, therefore varying slightly.

Each plot is harvested separately and kept in individual batches throughout the winemaking process and some of the maturation program. The wines reflect these differences intimately and unfailingly from the beginning. For example, Block 20, the "Front Gate" Chardonnay, always is the basis and the backbone of the "Art Series" wine. The young wine begins with true varietal power of great delicacy which then actually requires up to 12 months of lees contact in new French oak in order to draw out the complexity; losing none of that essential balance in the process. Block 21, "Denis' Road", on the other hand, always gives a full, sweet and soft wine requiring less wood maturation in most years and resulting in an obvious "Prelude."

So what is it then that makes Block 20 the ultimate producer of chardonnay grapes? It is situated on the mid to low slopes of one of the rolling gravelly hills formed by the dissecting creek system of the vineyard. Aspect and exposure is to the north and west. The vines are now thirty years old and are the original 1957 importation, which came to be known as the "Gin Gin Clone" (as the material came from the Houghton vineyard at Gin Gin). The soils are moderately deep laterite gravels over ancient base rock and are generally acid pH of 5.4-5.8. These granitic soils are some of the oldest and most leached in Australia. They also happen to be textbook quality for growing vines because of their general "warmth" and well-drained openness which allows great root penetration and exploration.

Compared to some of Leeuwin's other vineyard sites the vines in Block 20 seem to grow in a perfectly balanced way. The sea breeze cools them - summer sun lights them gently and evenly both morning and afternoon as it passes across the direction of the rows. The soil appears to be just deep enough to allow leaf growth up to the commencement of ripening, yet not so abundant as to confuse the vine into growing and ripening at the same time.

As vigneron, Leeuwin does what is necessary to maintain things by routinely controlling powdery mildew, weeds and unwanted shoots; training the foliage during the summer into a vertical hedge with a small amount of leaf removal where necessary near the bunches and then reaping the annual rewards in March.

Yields are moderate, never more than 2.5 tonnes to the acre and the bunches are rather small with lots of "hens and chickens", but it is always ripe with usually 8-9gms/litre of natural acidity together with that delicately pronounced but extremely mouth persistent varietal flavor.

The fruit flavors are mirrored in the resulting wine, which originates with delicate balance but has a capacity to age into something extraordinarily powerful and mouth filling whilst still maintaining its finesse such as the 1982 "Art Series" wine.

The strange thing about the beginnings of a potentially great wine is its reticence. Tastings are all about assessing texture and weight, the latency of the flavor. Wonderful ripe grape flavors with their immediacy and attack are masked in the new wine. It takes 6-12 months of coaxing to bring back firstly the pineapples, then the pears, and sometimes peaches of the grape. Then there is the further time in wood, then bottle, to add to and confirm flavors from the vineyard. And the winemaking must be of the lightest touch, maintaining balance; not allowing anything to dominate.

Leeuwin likes to finish up tasting the fresh fruit, smell the scent of the vine flowers, taste and appreciate all the winemaking touches. To be able to dwell on the color, remembering it is a reflection of both the ripening conditions and winery care. The finished wine must taste full but alive in the mouth with all these things but also have a lingering finish that must be the essence and harmony of it all.

When the new vintage arrives, the canes on the vines have turned brown, the leaves are shades of lighter green and yellow; all growth is directed into nurturing the bunches. Here also there are subtle color changes in the berries as the ripening progresses in the sunlight - lime greens to straw, to straw yellow with suggestions of violet. The mild sunny March allows a steady rise in sugar and so when everything seems about right (taste, acid and sugar balance) in go the pickers.

The circumstances of the winery operations are thus. The grapes are picked when mature. They are then processed in two ways; --- The majority is crushed and chilled with a small amount whole bunch pressed. Most will get skin contact. The juices, each lot being kept separate, are further cooled and then set aside to stand cold until they have settled fairly clear. The must is yeasted then barreled so that fermentation takes place entirely in the barrel. Then predetermined amounts of malolactic fermentation are encouraged. After the primary fermentation, the wine remains on its yeast lees with frequent stirring in those same barrels for any time up to 12 months. It is then assembled, bottled and laid down to recover and further mature.

So goes the framework of it, though there is much embroidery and necessary good timing to get to the bottling.

Fermentation is started after cold settling using a mixture of selected yeast species. Leeuwin has found that the spontaneous fermentations are not reliable in Margaret River yet, so they use a small amount of SO<sub>2</sub> to attenuate them in the must.

When fermentation grabs hold they gravitate to barrels and all Chardonnay is fermented in specially selected new French oak barriques through to dryness and then matured in the same barrel. The wood flavors are quite strongly and definitely picked up by the must, but by some strange alchemy during fermentation those raw tannins and wood flavors are recreated into something approaching mature Chardonnay varietal characters, enhanced by a little smokiness and pointing up those flavors already there.

The secret is to find through trial the type of oak and the cooper suitable to complement the vineyard. Leeuwin uses fine-grained woods from the Allier and Tronçais from French coopers. The juice and then wine is worked in the barrel regularly. Stirring to keep the ferment going and later rousing the lees to help the malolactic to go through and "yeast fine" the wine. The yeast also seems to mellow and coax the palate out of the extreme youth and adds richness to the mid palate.

Malolactic fermentation is used as a softening and an enriching process with certain selected lots. Leeuwin waits until after yeast fermentation is finished to decide on the necessary amount of malolactic, though it usually comes down to familiar lots. The finished Art Series blends have ranged over the years between 0 and 60% e.g. 1982 - 30%, 1983 none (hot year), 1986 - 30%, 1987 - 20%, 1988 - 25% and 1992 - 60%.

The wines sit on their yeast lees in the barrels topped and stoppered tight, quietly maturing and changing in the cool temperature maintained cellar.

They are roused monthly for stirring and further topping. During the first winter - spring period, tasting at the same time shows the young wines to be slowly shrugging off the masking fermentation characters. Outstanding lots start to be obvious and using Block 20 as the basis formulates the idea of how the new Art Series will come together.

The final blending of the lots will not take place until each barrel has had the required amount of maturation time. Therefore while one lot (usually Block 20) can require up to 12 months, there are others that are lighter and more delicate that would show as top heavy and out of balance with more than nine months in wood. Always the Prelude wine of that year is bottled and ready for release, whilst the Art Series is still being matured in barrels.

It is usually 18 months after vintage that the Art Series wine is bottled after a light fining for stability. It is handled gently throughout the transferring and the first and only pumping of the wine is at bottling.

Bottles are then laid down and held binned in the cool storage cellar for not less than 15 months before release.

And so to "the lingering finish, which must be the essence and harmony of what comes before". This taste phenomenon begins to form in the middle stages of barrel maturation; the barrels seem to concentrate and refine all the fruit flavors modifying them gently across the palate but laying them strongly in the finish. Bottle age continues the process but also intensifies the nose, sometimes incredibly. It is these persistent things which really complete a good vintage like 1982 or 1987 and more recently the 1995, 1997 and 1999.

So, here's to more of them.



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