



## Our feature story: Delatite (Upper Goulburn, Victoria, Australia)

### Looking to the future while building on a rich history.

### — One Australian family's winemaking story.



#### David Ritchie (Owner, General Manager)

Robert and Vivienne Ritchie first planted vines on their cattle and sheep station in the Delatite Valley in 1968, at the time among the coolest vineyards in Australia, and built their own winery in 1982. Under the management of their son David since the early 2000s, Delatite was an early mover into biodynamic viticulture and minimal intervention in the winery, making small parcels of cool climate wines. While many see these moves as 'alternative', as the 3rd generation on their land, David takes a long-term view that good stewardship is vital to better expressing a very special site, and creating a viable future for succeeding generations. We talked with David Ritchie.

(Interviewer: Dion Lenting, Kiwi Copy, April 2022)

#### ◆Q. How did Delatite get started?

**David** — In the late 1960s while my Dad was skiing on Mt Buller, which is next door, he met Jim Irvine\*1, one of the modern founding fathers of the South Australian wine industry. Jim thought this area would be a great place to plant vines as it had a really good climate. The following year my mum found a bundle of 'little sticks', as she called them, dumped by the cattle grid while taking us kids to school, left by Jim on his way to Mt Buller. She put them in the garden, and later mum and dad planted them out on traditional wide Australian lines of the time with space for farm tractors – it was a grazing property with cattle, sheep and a bit of rye grass.

Those 'little sticks' were 800 or so vines of Riesling, Cabernet, Shiraz and Carignan. These are still the basis for our Donald's Block Cabernet Merlot, Robert's Block Shiraz, and Vivienne's Block Riesling. We ripped out the Carignan in the mid-70s because the climate was too cold for them to ripen. Few years later, Dad rang Jim and said "we've got some grapes, what do we do with them?" Fortunately, or unfortunately, he went and talked to Brown Brothers in Milawa, old John senior and young John (now in his 70s) who was head winemaker, and they said, "we'd be delighted to take your grapes and make special limited production wines." So, they made our wines for us until mum and dad set up our own winery in 1982 with and Tony Jordan\*2 and Brian Croser\*3's help, and with Max Loder consulting on viticulture.

At the same time, my sister Ros who went to study at Roseworthy, came back to be winemaker. I'm her younger brother by 5 years, and came back home for 12 months when we first put in the winery, then from university 2 years later and have been here ever since.

#### ◆ What did you plant and how quickly did you scale up?

We planted Gewürztraminer in 1970, more Shiraz and Cabernet, Sylvaner which we ripped out in the mid-80s, Pinot Noir in the mid-70s, Malbec and Merlot in the late-70s, Chardonnay in 1982 and Sauvignon Blanc in 1986. By the early 80s we were also looking at what the wine trends were and what we thought would grow here.

In the mid-80s, partly because we over-capitalized, mum and dad made the decision to sell land to help pay for the winery. We were too big to be small, and not big enough to scale up production. We were doing 50 tons in 1982, and around 100 tons by the mid-80s. We didn't have a huge cellar door trade, and for a long time weren't willing to buy grapes from anyone else or other areas. So in years when Delatite crops were low, we really suffered from the vagaries in yields.

We've planted an extra 10-12 hectares over the last decade and are planting more, but most of that is because all our original vines are on their own roots and not on root stock, and phylloxera isn't very far away – only 10 or 15 kms. Some of our old blocks are also difficult to manage due to the space between rows, are full of eutypa, and need to be replaced because the yield is down to half-to-one tonne an acre. That's okay if we can sell our reserve block wines at \$100 a bottle, but for our normal wines at \$30-35 it is not economic.

#### ◆ How has the business and the climate changed since you first started?

Today the vineyard is 29 hectares, and we will probably end up with 30-32 hectares. We have 15 or 16 different varieties. We were about 65-35 white to red, but over the next



David Ritchie with his mother Vivienne, who founded Delatite.

**<About Delatite>** Specializing in cool climate wines, Delatite is a small family-run winery established in north-east Victoria in 1982 by Robert and Vivienne Ritchie, and now run by their son David with the assistance of winemaker Andy Browning. The 29-hectare vineyard sits on red ironstone soils at an altitude of 450-500m, on slopes that vary in gradient and outlook from north-east to north-west. The winery is sited on a picturesque rise overlooking the vineyards toward Mt Buller, and in 2021 completed a major upgrade of the cellar door and restaurant.

3-4 years that will change to about 55-45. We still have a lot Riesling and Pinot Gris. I've just planted Pinot Noir, but I know that in 20-30 years time it will be only be good for dry red because it is getting too hot.

Back in the 80s we were starting vintage in early March and finishing a full moon cycle (in Steiner terms) after Easter at least. Over the last decade we normally start picking around early to mid-February and finish before Easter. So basically harvest has come forward four full weeks, which is what scientists back in the 70s said, that it would be a week earlier each decade in Australia. It isn't lineal, but we have found that to be true. More importantly, for red wines, that 4 weeks is actually 6, because we are getting an extra one to two Baume of ripeness. Back in the 80s if we got 12.5 or 13 Baume in our Cabernet or Shiraz we were over the moon. Today we can get to 14-14.5 no problems, picking 4 weeks earlier. So we have to be careful, there are large areas of Australia which will be too hot within 20 years.

We still have Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Malbec, but are planting Spanish red varieties now because I love the wines of Spain and Portugal, both the whites and reds, their food and cultures, and it is a point of difference. And also because we need to adapt to climate change. So we have Tempranillo, Graciano, Touriga, Garnacha (using the Spanish term rather than the French), and are planting a small amount of Monastrel/Mourvedre.

#### ◆ Can you expand on your philosophy and where you see things heading?

Let's go back to the philosophy. We sent our kids to a Steiner school in Mansfield until they went away to a boarding school. I wasn't sure about the whole Rudolf Steiner thing until I was exposed to it through the school, and at a workshop at Julian Castagna's\*4 in Beechwood that opened my eyes to the fact we needed to do something differently, because I could see that our soils were no longer healthy. Dad wasn't a big chemical user, but sometimes he did and would come back with a blood nose, and I was already suspicious of a lot of herbicides and insecticides, so I thought we needed to go down the biodynamic route.

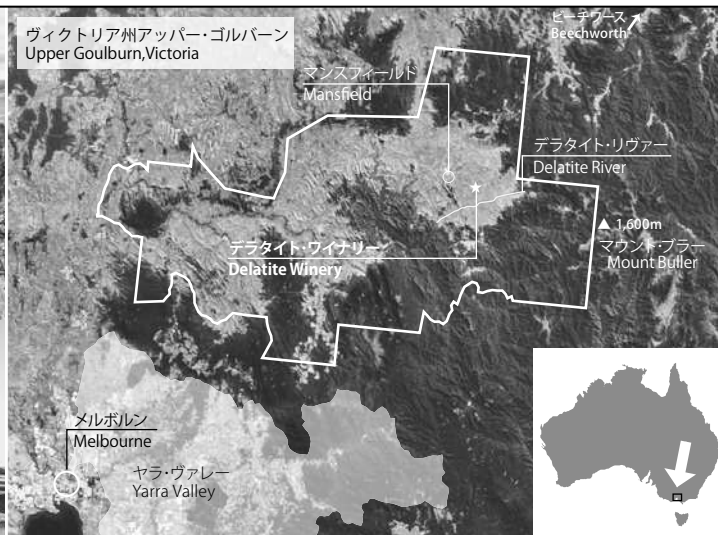
Everything we do or hope to do is based on 'terroir'. For me, it is not just about the soil and the climate, it's our interaction with the grapes, the vineyard and the land, how we approach winemaking, so terroir is that whole sense of place. And I think Delatite is in a unique place and space in terms of biodynamics, the winery and winemaking. There is no-one within kilometers of us, it's very old sedimentary soils, there is no pollution, there are broadacre farms around, but no other grape growers or orchardists. Our philosophy is based around looking at what we can do from our place, and the best we can without any intervention. So, I suppose you could say I'm a hippy in conservative clothing.



In 1972 Vivienne Ritchie made Delatite's first wine using a baby bath and small press.



In 2021, Delatite opened a new cellar door and restaurant looking over the vineyards to Mount Buller and the Australian Alps. The facility enables them to host diverse events like the Harvest Moon Festival, where guests can enjoy bonfires, yoga, local produce and more.



◆How has your winemaking evolved over time?

It has evolved from the technical Australian way of stainless steel, cultured yeast, fermenting, maybe some varieties go into oak for ferment, putting in malolactic, racking, filtering, adding fining agents and a lot of stuff to clean the wine up. We did that until the mid-2000s. With Jane Donat who was the first winemaker to join us, and now Andy Browning who has worked at Pascal Marchand\*5, and is interested in biodynamics, we have gone back to a much more natural form of winemaking. It is a very gentle process, all-natural yeast, we ferment a portion of all our white varieties in large oak, and for some small runs 100 per cent, not for the flavour but for integration, palate weight, complexity, and they all sit on yeast lees be it in tank or barrel, and they get stirred. And all our reds are plunged by hand.

We are doing very much what the Germans and Alsations have done for centuries in our white winemaking. It uses less power because we are not cooling them all the time, filtering or adding stuff. It is not only better, it is cheaper. It's amazing. It allows the site to express itself. I just love it.

◆What inspired you to make the Hell's Window orange wine and Pet-Nat?

We have been making Hell's Window for 5 or 6 years now, and it was a natural progression for us to go that one step further from what we were already doing – using natural yeast and oak. We had tasted a few and seen that there was this move towards orange wines, so we tried it and it worked really well. We pick all the grapes on the same day, and to see the purple, pink and yellow of the Pinot Gris, Riesling and Gewurztraminer grapes all in the same tank, was beautiful. That first year we only made 95 dozen, but fortunately it took off, and we made more each year, with 600-700 dozen last year. That gave us the confidence to explore further. My daughter and son opened our eyes to the fact that their friends drink orange wines and pet-nat, and gave us the confidence and push to make them. Today, 15 per cent of our production is in those two natural wines.

◆What is involved in making the Pet-Nat?

It is not that hard. For us, it's just like we make with our sparkling, we pick both the Riesling and Gewurztraminer a little earlier than normal, and ferment them together. We then make it in 250-300 dozen batches because that is all we can keep warm during bottle fermentation, and that's it.

◆How would you express Delatite's uniqueness?

It's about a lot of things: history, sense of place, biodynamics, natural, and how they interact with each other. What you see is what you get with Delatite. We aren't particularly complicated, I think we 'overdeliver' on price and always have, and the vineyard and winery teams strive to deliver wines that speak to people and sense of place. With a lot of business now coming from direct to consumer, cellar door and the dining room, it is all about giving people a great experience, really good food and wines that relate to us and our philosophies.

- \*1 Jim Irvine: Renowned wine consultant who travelled and worked widely, with a focus on cooler climate wines. Now retired, he runs his own winery in the Barossa and Eden Valley, South Australia.
- \*2 Dr Tony Jordan (1919-2019): Involved in establishing a number of wineries, including Domaine Chandon Australia. At one time ran a wine consultancy with Brian Croser.
- \*3 Brian Croser: Founder of Petaluma, an Adelaide Hills winery.
- \*4 Julian Castagna: Film producer turned winemaker, pioneer of biodynamic winemaking in Australia since the late 1990s.
- \*5 Pascal Marchand: Canadian-born international Burgundian natural wine producer.

《From Village Cellars.》

We started working with Delatite about 20 years ago, and have continued to do since then. I still vividly remember the first time I visited, in the early 2000s - the journey into the remote mountains, the steep vineyards slopes and distant glow of snowy alpine peaks as I climbed the hills.

I now understand even more how they started a new winery at a time when cool wines from higher altitudes weren't as popular as they are now, and how they have steadily developed their business in their own style, keeping an eye on current trends while not being carried away by them. Today it has become a must-visit destination. The access roads are better now, there is a good selection of cellar doors and restaurants with a warm, casual atmosphere just a couple of hours' drive from Melbourne.

PICK UP WINE

CODE 11740

different white varietals in exquisite harmony

**Delatite**  
**MansField White 2019 (screw cap)**

Variety: Pinot Gris30%/Gewurztraminer28%/Chardonnay20%  
Riesling18%/Viognier4% Alc. 13.2%

RRP ¥2,850

**WINEMAKING** A field blend of five biodynamically-grown aromatic white varietals, whole bunch pressed, naturally fermented with no MLF. Aged for 10 months on lees in large old French oak. No filtration or fining, minimal sulphites used only at bottling. Vegan wine.

**TASTING NOTE** Mellow aromas of honeysuckle and apricot with hints of musk. On the palate, full fruit flavours of lime and honey fill the mouth, while the refreshing acidity keeps the wine fresh and beautifully balanced. Will age beautifully for up to 20 years.

CODE 11738

Orange wine made from white grapes using red winemaking techniques

**Delatite**  
**Hell's Window 2021 (screw cap)**

Variety: Pinot Gris42%/Gewurztraminer37%/Riesling21%  
Alc. 12.4% Residual sugar 2.2 g/L

RRP ¥2,850

**WINEMAKING** 3 biodynamically-grown white varietals are harvested on the same day and combined (natural fermentation, no MLF) including skins and seeds. Pressed and matured in old French oak for 5 months. No filtration or fining, minimal sulphites used only at bottling. Vegan wine.

**TASTING NOTE** Fragrant musk and water melon aromas. On the palate, pure acidity and minerality enhance the fresh fruit flavours of guava and spice, astringency from the skins gives a dry finish. Some bubbles and lees from secondary fermentation in the bottle. Hell's Window is named after a large rock near Delatite.