

GIACONDA RETROSPECTIVE TASTING 1985 - 2002 FEBRUARY 2005

In February we held a retrospective tasting of all wines produced by Giaconda from the 1985 Cabernet (the only wine produced in '85) through to the 2002 vintage. Vintage 2005 was the 21st at Giaconda.

The following notes were compiled by Doug Neal.

CHARDONNAY

OVERALL COMMENT.

To be unashamedly blunt, this was a startling vertical. Every wine had life and quality with certain vintages standing out as being exceptional. I have no qualms in stating emphatically that Giaconda chardonnays will age gracefully. Putting aside the vagaries of bottle variation, the line-up showed that complex and age worthy wines have been made at Giaconda (and will continue to be). Neither typical of Australian chardonnay nor imitations of white Burgundy, they are true terroir wines that reflect the land and their maker - sophisticated and unique.

1986: Still alive showing notes of honey, mineral, toast and hazelnut. Not showing signs of falling apart. Good depth of fruit and acidity still keeping the wine long on the palate. Drink now

1987: Lambs wool, minerals, racy acidity, lemon and lime notes with a clear mineral edge. Holding well – a surprise but best drunk now for best impact.

1988: Very much alive with a lot more flesh than the 1987. Toast, honey, minerals with lemon acidity still showing. Holding well but best drunk now.

1989: Smokey, toasty notes with a very taut structure. Very cool, wet year. Mineral notes prominent with a long clean finish. Will probably last another five or so years but best drunk now. A revelation in terms of its condition and quality.

1990: A remarkable wine that continues to shine: lambs wool, toast, minerals, hazelnut, fennel and a powerful yet clean finish. A bit more fat but with plenty of acidity to keep it alive. Will still shine for another handful of years.

1991: Fresh fruit nose, a bit cheesy, minerals- this wine had a strong mineral element from the outset, spice notes with a citrus accent and vibrant acidity. Holding well with less fat than the 1990 but with enough punch to suggest a few more years of life.

1992: Showing more development. Toast, honey, aniseed and minerals but looking a little flat in comparison to the wines on either side of it. Drink up now, no use holding on to bottles as it is near the end of its life.

1993: Glorious wine, fresh, vibrant with a complex aroma and a long fine palate. Taut, minerals, lingering notes of stone fruit, with a subtle tertiary development of toast and honey. Lingering acidity making for a youthful wine. Will live for 5 plus years.

1994: Toast, honey, cashew and white peach notes with a spicy edge and vibrant acidity. Holding well and should continue so for a few more years.

1995: Matchstick, fennel, spice with strong core of fruit and a lingering sensation of wet stones. Rich attack with white peach fruit and a lingering acid spine that lengthens the palate. Holding well on its plateau. Drink now and enjoy its complex developed characters.

1996: Funky and toasty leading to matchstick; beyond the bouquet are layers of stone fruit, spice, minerals and hazelnut. Powerful yet refined. Still very youthful and will continue to live for 10 years. One of the clear stars from the outset, it has only enhanced its quality over time.

1997: Honey and lambs wool aromas. The palate is fatter and richer with less obvious minerality than previous vintages. In spite of the warmer year the wine is holding well with the lingering lemon acidity note keeping the wine together. I cannot see it improving but it is holding well and will do so over the next few years.

1998: One of my favourite vintages from the outset. As good as the 1996 and on the day it was head to head with it in terms of complexity. It shows toast, matchstick and a taut structure with a silky, mineral tone rippling through the wine. Powerful yet light on its feet and as I predicted, the equal of the 1996 in quality.

1999: Hedonistic wine. Fig, hazelnut, cream, toast with a background of smoky spicy oak mingling with the mineral elements. Complex and fuller in style like a decadent Meursault. It has fruit intensity with layers of flavours underscored by refreshing acidity. It is delicious now but will hold and evolve further tertiary characters over the next 10 years.

2000: Matchstick, spice, poached pears and apples. A textural wine with a slightly more broad fruit profile. Not as complex or fine given the warmer vintage conditions. Still it has plenty of stuffing and will continue to tighten as it evolves just as the 1997 has improved with age. Perhaps best drunk up over the next few years to gain maximum enjoyment.

2001: Peachy, spicy, with notes of meal and dirt and wood smoke. Much more white peach in character with a lingering acidity that keeps the winemaking artifacts in check. Plenty of stuff happening here but lacking a touch of finesse to be sitting alongside the stars of the line-up. In time, like the 2000, the mineral notes will start to come though and bring a brighter focus to the wine. Very good and will come together.

2002: Smoky oak, nectarine, orange peel spice, funk, dirt with a long, fine palate. Here is power and refinement; complexity without a heavy hand. My notes here are quite short: intriguing, fine, complex, lingering – it will only get better over the next 10 plus years as it slowly reveals all of its qualities.

PINOT NOIR

OVERALL COMMENT:

In the context of the verticals this was the weakest link. There were wines that showed the complexity and delightful nature of pinot noir. And so too were there wines that had either not aged well or were simply interesting red wines, having lost their magic with time in bottle. Having said that, I can think of few producers making pinot noir in Australia over the past 20 years, who would not have experienced the same highs and all too frequent lows associated with this most precocious variety. In the context of Australian pinot noir these have at least been up there amongst the top bunch. Perhaps the telling of this story should coincide with the changes in climatic conditions since 1997 which have generally brought much hotter vintage conditions which do not suit pinot noir. The issue of whether Beechworth is the good place to grow pinot noir makes for an interesting debate. Clearly in the Nantua Vineyard, which is at a higher altitude, where the pinot is located in a much cooler part of the southerly slope, the deliberations to date have been most pleasing. Far better than the quality from the original planting, it shows the elements of forest floor, cherry fruit without the sweeter spectrum of flavours that have been present in the more recent wines as they develop in bottle. The earlier wines tell a different story – experimentation with different techniques and the young vine syndrome. In revisiting these wines it showed what Rick was able to achieve in the most modest of circumstances in the formative years of Giaconda.

1987: Old, earthy, mint and sweet cheery fruit with fine lingering tannins. In excellent condition and not showing any signs of falling apart.

1988: Again, earthy and a blue cheese character; dark cherry fruit, sweet fruit palate although a little low in tannins. Drink up.

1989: Plum fruit, sappy, spicy with a touch of forest floor. Acidity helping to keep it together. From a very cool year this wine was delightful about 7 years ago. It is now fading and past its best. Drink Up.

1990: An interesting wine because it looked quite strange when it was first released. It is now showing cherry to raspberry fruit with a gamey aroma. The attack is sweet fruit but it appears to be fading and drying out on the end palate. Drink up.

1991: One of the highlights of this vertical: Bright fruit, good intensity and fine, savoury tannins. Quite taut and not showing any signs of falling apart. Sweet fruit and complex tertiary aromas make for an enjoyable experience. Drink now and really enjoy it.

1992: Sweet, lingering black cherry fruit with undergrowth elements showing through. Has always been recognized as one of the best Giaconda pinots and it did nothing to tarnish its reputation. This wine became the benchmark, but in Rick's quest to make even better wine he recognized that this wine needed more tannin. In addition he went in search of techniques in the following years that would bring more Burgundian like aromatics to the wines. Starting to fade, best drunk up now.

1993: Cooler, wet year and the fruit never really made the grade. Stemmy, sappy, strawberry fruit showing tartness on the palate. Well past it.

1994: Very briary and brick red with a distinct browning showing as it did upon release. Sweet fruit mingles with briar and the wet ash of a camp fire extinguished. Starting to dry out and really not going anywhere. It was strange year throughout most of Victoria for pinot noir, and this wine was no exception.

1995: This has always been one of my favourites. Red plum with forest floor notes, barnyard that adds more interest to the wine. The palate is still quite silky though the signs of fading are showing through. Best drunk now as it has passed its best.

1996: Delightful nose of dewy rose gardens at dawn. Unfortunately the intoxicating aroma is not matched by the palate which remains short and slightly on the mean side. A very cool year and the flavour has not developed sufficient depth to live up to the promise indicated by the bouquet. Drink now.

1997: Plum, silk and spice with a very lifted aroma of sweet fruit - touch of VA at work. The palate is quite rich but the acidity remains disjointed. Clearly the work of a very hot year where acid adjustment required was never going to allow for complete integration. Drink up

1998: Dewy rose garden aromas, silky texture and wood spice notes showing through. The tannins are fine and lingering and the palate is rich. Showing some sweet fruit character and a touch of prune on the end. Drink over the next few years.

1999: Strawberry, spice, tea leaf, cherry, hint of briar and wet ash all combine to make an interesting and enjoyable wine. The acidity and fine tannins keep the palate together. It will in time become more interwoven and should continue to develop and show well over the next five or so years.

2000: Sweet cherry fruit, wood spice and plenty of gripping tannin to pull the wine together. Here the fruit is in a tussle with the tannins. Nevertheless, there is enough fruit punch for this wine to keep going over the next five years.

2001: Crimson red in colour and a sweet fruit aroma showing through - a slight raisin to prune like flavour emerging. This was not like this upon release and is somewhat of a mystery but the proof is in the bottle. I cannot see this changing. Drink up now.

2002: A vibrant wine; spicy notes, cherry fruit with silky tannins, excellent acidity and plenty of ripe but not overtly sweet fruit tightly coiled in a mesh of tannins. This is the 1992 with all the extra bits that have been developed through trial and tribulation. Will live longer than the 1992 – it has the fruit, structure and complexity.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON:

OVERALL COMMENT

It has long been my view that the cabernet has been the quiet achiever of the Giaconda collection outshining the pinot in many years. Why it has received limited attention is best explained by the fact that there are only between 220 and 260 cases produced each year. Hardly the quantity required to make its presence felt on the market place. Nevertheless, it bats well above its allotted station in life, especially so after 1997. After a stellar beginning with the early vintages, the mid 1990s delivered a string of cooler years and wines lacked the stuffing and riper flavours delivered by the earlier cabernets. Having said that the Giaconda cabernet (85% cabernet, 10% merlot and 5% cabernet franc) does not behave like a typical cabernet. As it develops in the bottle it tends to soften and look like a rich merlot – black cherry to plum fruit with a fine cedary, tannic spine. In doing so it makes it harder to define but if simply looked at in terms of structure and complexity, it is a very fine style. A number of changes after 1997 have been of great benefit to the wine – the move to vsp canopy management, the new plantings at the top of the vineyard and the introduction of new Bordeaux oak barrels. As the earlier wines showed, the cabernet can live for 20 years. The newer releases are better due to improved winemaking, older vines, better fruit management and a growing appreciation that this wine is a reflection of its terroir, making it unique.

1985: The first wine released and I was anxious to see how it had aged. It did not disappoint. A touch of mint, black fruit notes with fine tannins and supple palate. Holding well and showing no signs of fading.

1986: Showing mint, plum fruit and a slightly pine needle aroma. Good tannins, plenty of fruit still showing and fine tannins keeping it in balance.

1987: Bordeaux like leaf aromas, plum fruit, chocolate and fine drying tannins. Delicious, holding well and will keep on going for a few more years.

1988: A bigger version of the 1987. Sweet black plums married together by the fine tannins. A plush wine that continues to hold itself in good condition. Powerful with a mouthful of flavour.

1989: Cool, wet year and released under the Enigma label: Leaf and green capsicum notes; plenty of fine chiselled tannins and crunchy acidity. The fruit never quite got there, and is now fading. Looked better a few years ago but it is on a fairly rapid decline now.

1990: A beefy wine with plenty of extract. Showing some mint and a plum fruit character. Drying tannins are starting to make more presence on the end palate. Fruit is starting to diminish. Best drunk up now.

1991: Another of the early highlights for me. Plums to black cherry fruit with fine tannins and excellent acidity. Makes a strong impact and the palate is long and complex. Overtones of leaf and cedary tannins make it look more like an Australian version of a Left bank wine. Still holding well, and will do so for some time.

1992: A wine to debate. Brett? The tasters were divided on this one. Certainly some more undergrowth to barnyard characters came to the fore. I was happy to ride the horse as the palate was rich, complex and saddled with a fine coat of tannin. Excellent fruit weight and showing no signs of needing to go to the knackery.

1993: Here the vintage has been unkind. Notes of vegemite, leaf with some sweet red cherry fruit pushing through. Lacking in stuffing and complexity. Best drunk up now.

1994: Quite a strong aroma of cabernet leaf – perhaps a little too much. On the palate the fruit is moving into the plum spectrum and there are some fine grained cedary tannins. Quite like a Left Bank Bordeaux from a good year but not in the league of the early 90s wines. Cannot see it improving and best drunk up now.

1995: A pleasant red cherry fruit with fine tannins and sufficient acidity. Not much weight and lacking a little in the complexity department. A pleasant drink and nicely crafted with all the bits gelling. Drink now. It is not going anywhere exotic but the ride is smooth and pleasant enough.

1996: Licorice, cedar, a bit of mint mixed in and ripe plum fruit combine to make for an interesting wine. A touch of balsamic like character brings a richness and crunchy acid bite that helps pull the fruit longer on the palate. Holding nicely and will improve over the short term. Drink over the next five years.

1997: Lifted black plums, spice, bit of barnyard and quite spicy. Ripe black fruits, rich and full with soft tannins. More loose knit and probably best drunk over the next few years. Enjoyable for its fullness and exotic aromatic notes.

1998: Very similar to the 1997 with a core of ripe black fruits but a little more tannin. Bold fruit impact with lingering cedar and spice notes. Powerful but a bit short on complexity. It will hold for another five years at least.

1999: Sensational! Toast, cedar, leaf, cigar `box with plush black currant fruit strung on a dry, spicy and fine tannic spine. This is a very fine cabernet with both power and finesse. It will live its 20 years with ease.

2000: Powerful black plum fruit, cedar and smoky oak notes underscored by fine, savoury tannins. Very rich and full with strong fruit punch. A little in your face, not being as sophisticated as the previous year. Although not for the long haul, it will deliver plenty of punch over the next five to eight years.

2001: Smoke, licorice, plum, cedar, touch of chocolate with a gorgeous, slinky texture. More feminine in style; beautifully balanced and headed for long term cellaring. It will bring plenty of oos and aahhs now but it will deliver more in ten year's time. One of the stars' of the tasting.

2002: Take the 01 and add more fruit powerful and tannin. Plum fruit, cedar, spice, smoke and a chorus of finely chiselled tannins wrapped in a silky texture. More masculine than the 01 and destined for 20 years of exciting times.

SHIRAZ

OVERALL COMMENT.

The Warner Vineyard shiraz has quickly emerged as the shining star in the Giaconda red program. In the space of four vintages this wine has already reached a position of acceptance as one of the finer examples of spicy, cooler climate Australian shiraz. Looking at the 2004 and 2005 in barrel it is clear that the envelope of quality is being pushed even farther. Ripe flavours without sweet fruit characters is the aim for this wine, and each year Rick moves closer to his goal. Watch this space as the Warner Vineyard's northern facing slope is delivering powerfully complex fruit, and the amphitheatre planting at Giaconda has delivered its first results and the feeling is one of deep satisfaction with the power, structure and complexity of the latest planting.

1998: Buffalo River. A small taking from Buffalo River as a trial run for the following year. Surprisingly good with bitumen, blackberries, a hint of coconut and a spice. Textural but low in tannin. Rich, enjoyable and best drunk up now whilst the primary fruit remains vibrant.

The Warner Vineyard Shiraz.

1999: Spicy with a strong lift from the roussanne. The fruit is black and the tannins are fine and elegant. Medium bodied but deftly crafted and immensely enjoyable. Best drunk over the next five years.

2000: Plums, spice with an emerging graphite like flavour. Appears a little low in tannin but the end flavour is a combination of graphite and minerals delivering a savoury end note. Sweet black fruit with enough structure and twists to make it more than just interesting.

2001: Graphite, chocolate, black cherries, silky tannins, less obvious fruit sweetness and rippling fine fruit and oak tannins. Irresistibly good and will develop well over the next five to eight years.

2002: Deeply coloured almost black, blackberries, earthy characters, roasted meats, a bit of reduction in the background and a lick of vanilla, black pepper and a seductive flinty graphite-like aroma. Amazingly different!

The palate has tremendous richness, but the tensile graphite-like structure keeps the wine focused. Like the bouquet, the palate is an explosion of flavours, blackberries, leather, spices, vanilla, a snippet of toasty oak, black pepper as a seasoning all fluently pulled together by the fine grained tannins and cleansing acidity.

There is little doubt Rick has headed off in a direction of his own with the desire to pursue intensity and graphite-like characters that are the hallmark of truly great Cote Roties. It's not about overtly peppery characters – it's all about refined power with a subtext of succulent fruit held in check. An incredibly fine savoury tannin profile. Ripeness without sweetness is the goal.

AEOLIA

OVERALL COMMENT

Take three Roussanne vines, a bucket, tread on the grapes at a temperature below 6 c and then pour liquid into two litre glass bottles. Then let nature take its course. Rather simple but this is how the roussanne came to be. After years of looking at the quality of these rudimentary wines, Rick decided that roussanne and Beechworth had a symbiotic relationship that was worth pursuing. Planting commenced at the Nantua and Warner vineyards between 1995 and 1996. In the short period of time since the release of the first Aeolia (2000) the wine has achieved high accolades. Importantly, it has delivered the power, complexity and finesse that were thought possible. The intriguing aspect will be tracking the evolution of the wines in bottle over time. What is clear is the developing refinement of the style without losing flavour or complexity.

2000: Clear minerals on the nose mingled with an Alsace like sweet rose petal nose; rich, honeyed, spicy and mineral flashes wound up in a creamy, textured palate. Developed but certainly not fading. Drink now for the full throttle of the fruit.

2001: Honey dew, spice, Hawthorn bush with luscious rolling ripe fruit flavours. Texturally rich but not fat or cloying. The acidity and mineral notes keep the flavours rolling on the palate. Finer than the 2000 and more complex. Will keep for a few more years given the acidity and balance of the wine.

2002: Spice, honey dew, matchstick and minerals in an even more refined and elegant frame. Complex, taut and yet complete. It will live for at least another five years and possibly more.

2003: Fig, meal, honey, toast, smoke and minerals with a fine, powerful and full impact on the palate. Excellent wine and clearly the star of the 2003 vintage. More of a forward style and will possibly not age as well as the 2002 or 2004. Drink over the next three years

2004: Ripe honey suckle, with spicy notes and minerals on the palate. Less fat and more fine-boned. Excellent acidity and depth of flavour. The most elegant to date and destined to live the longest. Bottled in screwcap.

NANTUA 'LES DEUX'

OVERALL COMMENT.

This wine happened by necessity. A little left over rousanne and a partially full barrel of chardonnay were combined; over time the emerging wine was of sufficient interest to give rise to what appears rather strange bed fellows. Like the Aeolia this is a wine in progress and over the past five vintages there has been a refinement of the style. The 2000 had 15% roussanne and come the 2004 the percentage of roussanne was down to 7%. This wine was always destined to be an early drinking style but over time the fatness of the roussanne came to dominate the chardonnay. A little less roussanne has made the wine finer but it still carries some of the lush mid palate character of the earlier wines.

2000: Honey, mineral and a rich sweet attack of spicy melon fruit. Holding well and starting to show secondary development characters. Has developed a golden hue and is best drunk up over the next year or so.

2001: Minerals with wild fennel aromas, a little more obvious chardonnay fruit. The palate is zippy with a creamy texture and a mineral notes finishing on the back palate. Very good, more refined than the 2000 and will live at least another five years.

2002: Matchstick, minerals, silk with notes of nectarine to white peach. At this stage less mineral and the roussanne component sitting in the background. I suspect this will keep developing complexity over the next three to five years.

2003: Matchstick, white peach, honey dew with a controlled fatness on the palate. Soft, spicy and less mineral in character at this stage. Drink over the next three years.

2004: White peach, matchstick, spicy orange peel notes with some nicely trimmed fatness on the mid palate. Long and fine with a creamy, spicy, vibrant fruit flow. The most sophisticated of the line-up and will easily live for five plus years. Bottled in screwcap.