

“Get serious”

“One of our finest winemakers does things his own way.”

It was the final dinner at the Mornington Peninsula Pinot Noir Celebration early this year and comedian Campbell McComas was doing a hilarious impersonation of an English gent trying to convince us he was growing the finest pinot noir in all of England. Like most of the guests, I was in danger of falling off my seat with mirth, but directly in my line of sight was Rick Kinzbrunner and barely a flicker of a smile crossed his visage the entire performance.

No doubt he was thinking about bud numbers and yeast cell-counts; worrying about water-stress in the pinot block or the temperature gauge in the maturation cellar, back home in Beechworth.

He is a serious kind of guy. And his winery, Giaconda, hasn't got to the top of the ziggurat of Australian wine because its owner/winemaker is out partying every night. He is a very focused man: intense, shy and retiring. His eye doesn't often stray from the ball. Giaconda, the winery and four hectare vineyard Kinzbrunner established back in the early 1980s, might just be the greatest wine estate in Australia.

That's no small claim. But let's look at the facts. Every wine Giaconda makes is outstanding. There are no also-rans. For probably at least a decade Giaconda's chardonnay has been rated by many critics and observers as the best in Australia.

The pinot noir hasn't always been as good as it is today and possibly slightly erratic, but whose isn't? The wine has been steadily improving, with the 2001 clearly the best yet: a great pinot noir indeed. On the other hand, the cabernet sauvignon has been a stand-out for years a thrillingly racy, elegant, streamlined Bordeaux style with concentration, power and longevity. This is the trio on which Giaconda built its reputation. But in recent years Kinzbrunner has extended his repertoire with three sensational new wines. Warner Vineyard Shiraz, which throws down the gauntlet to any of the great, spicy cool-climate southern Australian shirazes, was launched from the 1999 vintage and with three releases on the ground it's already near the head of the pack.

Then there's a pure roussanne called Aeolia and an eccentric chardonnay roussanne blend called Nantua les Deux. With only two vintages released so far (2000 and '01) these are already established as excellent wines and with little competition it's easy to say that Aeolia is the best roussanne in Australia.

As for Nantua les Deux, it must gall those who envy Kinzbrunner to hear that it was created by accident: he happened to top up an ullaged chardonnay barrel with roussanne because that's all he had on hand and liked the result. “I always suspected roussanne would do well at Beechworth,” says Kinzbrunner.

“I'd had a bit of it in the vineyard for years and made small lots of it and it always looked good.” So when he decided to plant a new vineyard, three kilometres down the road from Giaconda on a very similar site, he included roussanne.

After realising it needed more sun and heat than the south-facing site where it was planted, he moved it to a north-facing slope. “It's difficult to grow, it's susceptible to disease, it's prone to over-cropping, it needs sun and a bit of water and fertilising. But I'm not keen on vignier and I certainly don't want marsanne.”

That's pretty much his oeuvre: six wines which waver between excellent and great and all the grapes are from three vineyards in much the same locality, the Warner shiraz being mostly off a vineyard owned by neighbour Graeme Warner. The truly remarkable thing is that Kinzbrunner is a one-man band: he is the owner, founder, winemaker, vineyard manager, style council and spiritual guide of Giaconda. It is a truly rare person who achieves all that by himself. The fact that he had made wine in three other countries (France, the US and New Zealand) before settling down at Beechworth and that he regularly drinks and has a keen appreciation of the great wines of the world, are undoubtedly factors. He knows what great wine is, he knows what he wants to achieve and how to get there.

Ask him how he's improved his pinot noir so much lately and he simply replies: “More work in the vineyard”. He's been putting a lot of effort into refining viticulture: fine-tuning the trellising and canopy management (also a big factor in the cabernet), better exposing the bunches to the light, and lowering yields. “I'm trying to get physiological ripeness without too much alcohol.”

If only more would follow that line of thinking. The prices are top-shelf and the wines are difficult to get especially the chardonnay. The 2001 sold for \$100 en primeur and \$130 ex-vineyard. Most of it is sold direct. The '01 pinot noir was \$65 to \$72; the '01 shiraz \$59 to \$65 and '01 cabernet \$50 to \$55. Yet to be released are the '02 Nantua les Deux (the '01 was \$47) and '02 Aeolia roussanne (\$85).

You might think that with his kind of fame, Kinzbrunner would be defending his position and shunning newcomers to the industry, but no: he helps a lot of people. I've lost count of the wannabes who show off their new chardonnay with the statement: “Rick Kinzbrunner helped me make it.”

On top of that, he doesn't seek the spotlight and prefers to let his wines do the talking. We need more like him. Just don't expect him to double up at your jokes. Details: www.giaconda.com.au

