

Good drinking

Wine Huon Hooke

The impeccable enigma

To protect the reputation of his wine, Beechworth maker Rick Kinzbrunner has junked a vintage.

Norman Lindsay sent a load of pictures to the tip and Old Masters used to over-paint canvases they didn't want anyone to see. Rick Kinzbrunner, owner of the outstanding Beechworth winery Giaconda, has done the winemaker's equivalent – he has decided his 2003 vintage chardonnay, pinot noir and Warner Vineyard shiraz are not good enough to sell.

Cabernet sauvignon is the winery's sole November release. Giaconda's other whites, Aeolia roussanne and Nantua Les Deux chardonnay roussanne blend, were released as usual earlier this year.

Kinzbrunner explains in a letter to mailing list clients that the summer of 2002-3 was just too hot. He is releasing the cabernet because the heat favoured it. He says: "2003 was an extremely hot year, one of the worst droughts for a long time with severe bushfires in January and February. The cabernet, being much later ripening, basically escaped all this and has given an excellent wine as generally we need hotter years to make great cabernet."

For a tiny winery such as Giaconda, which produces 2000 to 3000 cases a year, such a declassification is tantamount to tearing up most of the year's income. It is the act of a man with quality uppermost on his mind. Kinzbrunner won the *Qantas/Gourmet Traveller Wine Magazine's* winemaker of the year award in 2003. It's hard to imagine boutique winemakers following his example, even if the harvest was below par. For most, the economic imperative is too strong.

How does Kinzbrunner expect to make do for a year without a major part of his income? He has emailed his regular customers to outline a plan. He's selling a portion of his 2004 wines now – a year earlier than normal. In 12 months, he will sell the remainder of the '04s and the wines will be delivered in May 2006. In return for taking our money early, he's discounting the November '05

pre-delivery price by 12 to 15 per cent. The order form was to be posted yesterday on his website (www.giaconda.com.au). "I can tell you

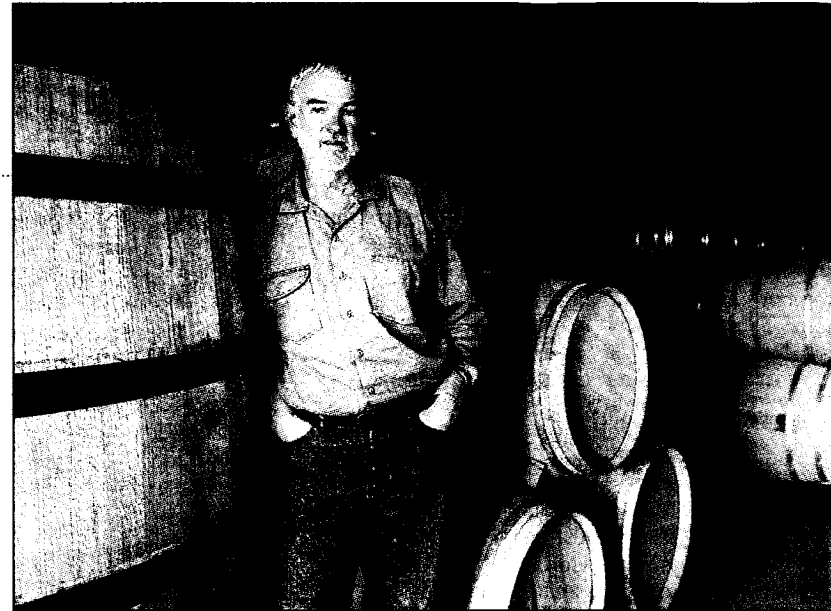
2004 is an impeccable vintage and the wines will be outstanding," Kinzbrunner writes. He thinks his '04 chardonnay is his best yet, which is saying something.

There have been many stand-outs. I recently attended a vertical tasting hosted by cellarage company WineArk, which included 12 vintages from 1987 to 2001, excluding '95, '97 and '98. As a group, they were stunning, with seven great wines ('96, '90, '87, '94, '99, '00 and '01) and the remainder (except for '89) ranging from very good to excellent. I don't believe anyone in this country could match the line-up, with the possible exception of Leeuwin Estate.

So Kinzbrunner has a top-rank reputation to protect: there's an expectation of superlative quality. Declassifying the vintage is seldom done in Australia – I can think of a handful of examples. Penfolds did not release a Bin 707 Cabernet from 2000 or 1995. Petaluma did not release a Coonawarra red from '89 or '83. Cape Mentelle and Leeuwin Estate both withheld recent cabernet releases, although those weren't due to seasonal problems.

Even with a discount, Giaconda wine is still quite expensive in Australian terms, especially the chardonnay. The '02 chardonnay was \$93 a bottle at the ex-winery, mailing-list price. The '04 is \$85 to order now (freight included) or an estimated \$96 next year, freight extra. The prices reflect the quality and scarcity. Kinzbrunner is not interested in increasing his output – yet he has planted more vines.

The stimulus was not the searingly hot '03 vintage,



and the way it highlighted the global warming phenomenon – although factors include increasingly early vintages and a belief that climate change would result in more hot vintages in the future.

Kinzbrunner planted a second vineyard, Nantua, nearby in 1996. It is 150 metres higher than Giaconda's original vineyard and the quality of its pinot noir is outstanding – so much so that it has found its way into the Giaconda pinot noir in recent vintages, and will probably supply all of that wine in the future.

Some of the pinot noir vines planted at Giaconda have been grafted over to chardonnay, which means less pinot noir and more chardonnay. Kinzbrunner expects the grafted vines will improve the chardonnay overall – especially in warmer years, as they are in a cool part of the vineyard.

Some of the world's most in-demand wines, especially red Bordeaux from the top chateaux, have been sold "en primeur" for years. It is a way for drinkers both to save money and secure stock of wines that can be difficult to procure. Petaluma has sold a portion of its Coonawarra merlot this way since the first vintage, 1990, and it's been very successful (the 2001 will be the last sold this way).

Giaconda's marketing manager, Russell Branton, says a portion of all future vintage releases will be available "en primeur" similar to the '04s, with the rest held until the usual release date, November a year later. "It will help the cash flow," he says.

Value judgement:
Kinzbrunner put
Giaconda's quality first.
Photo: Neil Newitt