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Jacques Lurton On Island Time



© [Quentin Chester](#) | Seal Bay Conservation Park, Kangaroo Island, Australia

What makes a winemaker from a heavy-hitting French dynasty opt for an insular life for five months of the year?

By Erica Berenstein | Posted Saturday, 07-Apr-2012

On a chilly day, a long way from his home in Bordeaux, Jacques Lurton is relishing the hills, the beaches, and the hopping wildlife of an island in the Southern Ocean.

"It has unpaved roads. It retains the pioneer feel. It's the bush. It's fabulous," says Lurton of Kangaroo Island, where he produces his label [The Islander Estate](#). Lurton adds that while his sometimes-residence might feel like the end of the earth, it is in fact only a 45-minute boat ride from the South Australian mainland.

For Lurton, the island – all 1,700 square miles of it – is something of an escape from the [Bordeaux](#) and [Loire](#) regions, where he also makes wine at vineyards that have been in his family for 170 years. His is a wine dynasty that traces its grape-growing roots back to 1650. Today, more than a dozen of his siblings and cousins collectively own 27 domains around the world.

Lurton may be the only one, though, to see a troop of kangaroos every morning and to be petitioned by a hungry wallaby most evenings while sitting on his terrace.

Kangaroo Island was discovered on March 2, 1802, by Matthew Flinders, captain of the Royal Navy survey ship HMS Investigator. It was uninhabited – Aborigines considered it taboo. Flinders reported abundant wildlife that seemed unfamiliar with human contact, including seals, whose "actions bespoke a knowledge of our not being kangaroos, whereas the kangaroo not unfrequently [sic] appeared to consider us to be seals." The kangaroos were presumably disavowed of this view after Flinders' crew slaughtered 31 of them for fresh meat.

Today, 4,500 people live on the island, one-third of which is covered in native bush. "You don't feel like you are in a wine region," says Lurton, who opened his winery in 2000. "You could make your way around the island and not even once see a vine." There were 18 vineyards when Lurton first visited in 1997 on honeymoon with his late wife. Today, he counts 28.

Kangaroo Island has the unusual combination of a sunny Mediterranean climate with ample rainfall. Friable, free-draining soil on Lurton's property makes it easy for young vines to establish roots, while pockets of clay retain water.



© Jacques Lurton | Jacques Lurton pictured at his Kangaroo Island winery

Lurton's vines are densely planted at 5,000 plants per hectare, compared with the roughly 3,000 per hectare more common in Australia. ([Grenache](#) and [shiraz](#) are exceptions, at around 1,900 vines per ha.) Lurton's 11-acre vineyard sits on the highest part of his 300-acre farm and is planted with [cabernet franc](#), [malbec](#), [sangiovese](#), shiraz, grenache, [viognier](#) and [semillon](#).

The island has the great agricultural advantage of being drought-free, a rarity in South Australia. Even on his free-draining sunny hillsides, Lurton has managed to avoid irrigating in three of his seven vintages.

Much of the island's farmland, including Lurton's own property, was cleared between 1947 and 1962 as part of a post-war land settlement scheme for returning servicemen. These "soldier settlers" did the killing work of hacking through thick bush and deep-rooted yakka trees, eventually establishing 174 farms on 250,000 acres.

Historian Jean Nunn, the wife of a soldier settler, explains that the hardships went beyond just the "impenetrable vegetation." She has described the way government bureaucracy failed the soldier settlers, who without the requisite farming equipment and machinery to clear the land, often went into debt – crippling debt.

The history is not lost on Lurton, who sought out Nunn when he first came to the island, to discuss the naming of his wines. The grenache-based blend [Old Rowley](#), for example, refers to a former member of Lawrence of Arabia's Camel Corps, Rowland Hill.

It was Hill who had set up an experimental 500-acre farm in 1938 that paved the way for soldier settlement. "He sacrificed his life, pretty much, to instal the settlers here," Lurton says. According to Nunn, Hill "worked tirelessly to fulfil the splendid vision of developing the plateau's unyielding soils."

For Lurton, that struggle to conquer the land is part of what makes his wines what they are. "Terroir without human beings does not exist," he says from his home in the center of the island, near the township of Parndana. "Human influence is part of the word 'terroir'. Terroir is the climate, the sun and man. It's the combination of all that allows the plant to make a certain kind of grape."

The Islander Estate's [Majestic Plough Malbec](#) is a nod to the hard work of previous generations, while the flagship wine, [The Investigator](#), remembers Captain Flinders' ship. The tasting note for the cabernet-franc blend explains that like the 19th-century vessel, the wine is aimed at putting Kangaroo Island on the map.

Lifelong resident Graham Trethewey has witnessed the way that human influence has transformed Kangaroo Island. Trethewey is the nephew of a local man who returned from the war and became a soldier settler. As he sits in his living room, taking in a view of the Australian mainland, he talks about an earlier ancestor, Richard Trethewey. The story goes that in the 1870s this Cornish immigrant would gaze out over the water at Kangaroo Island from the opposite vantage point, and say it reminded him of his home in England. By the end of that decade, Richard Trethewey had become the first person to buy land on the island.

One hundred and thirty years later, Graham Trethewey says the availability of land and a gentle climate have long lured immigrants, including a slew of more-recent arrivals who come for the lifestyle.

"A lot of them are retired, but we get a lot of what some of us refer to as alternatives," reports Trethewey. "We call them mung beans. Must be vegetarians, I suppose. If he's got long hair and walks around barefoot, he must be a mung bean."

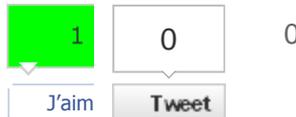
The neatly coiffed Lurton describes his operation on Kangaroo Island as "a lifestyle investment." He produces a modest 4,500 cases per vintage. Lurton makes his wines in a European style, "but my wine is still an Australian wine, because the quality and the density, the sugars and the tannins – I can only get that here."

British wine critic Jancis Robinson judges his 2005 vintage of Old Rowley as "pretty delicate stuff," and the 2008 vintage of [Wally White](#), a semillon-viognier blend, as "big and bold yet not fat."

Islander Estate wine is atypical of Australia's reputation for often full-bodied, rich wines – because, says Lurton, that's not what he likes to drink. "Why should I make wine that I don't want to drink? I've already done plenty of that in my life. I can make the wine that I am asked to make, if I am working for someone else. But here, I've taken all the commercial risks to make the wine that I want to make."



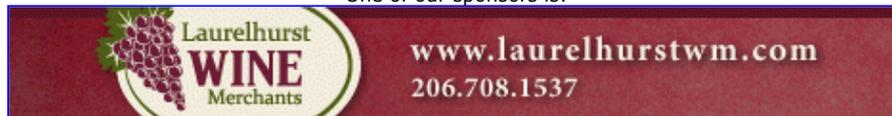
© Jacques Lurton | The Islander Estate's vineyard



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