

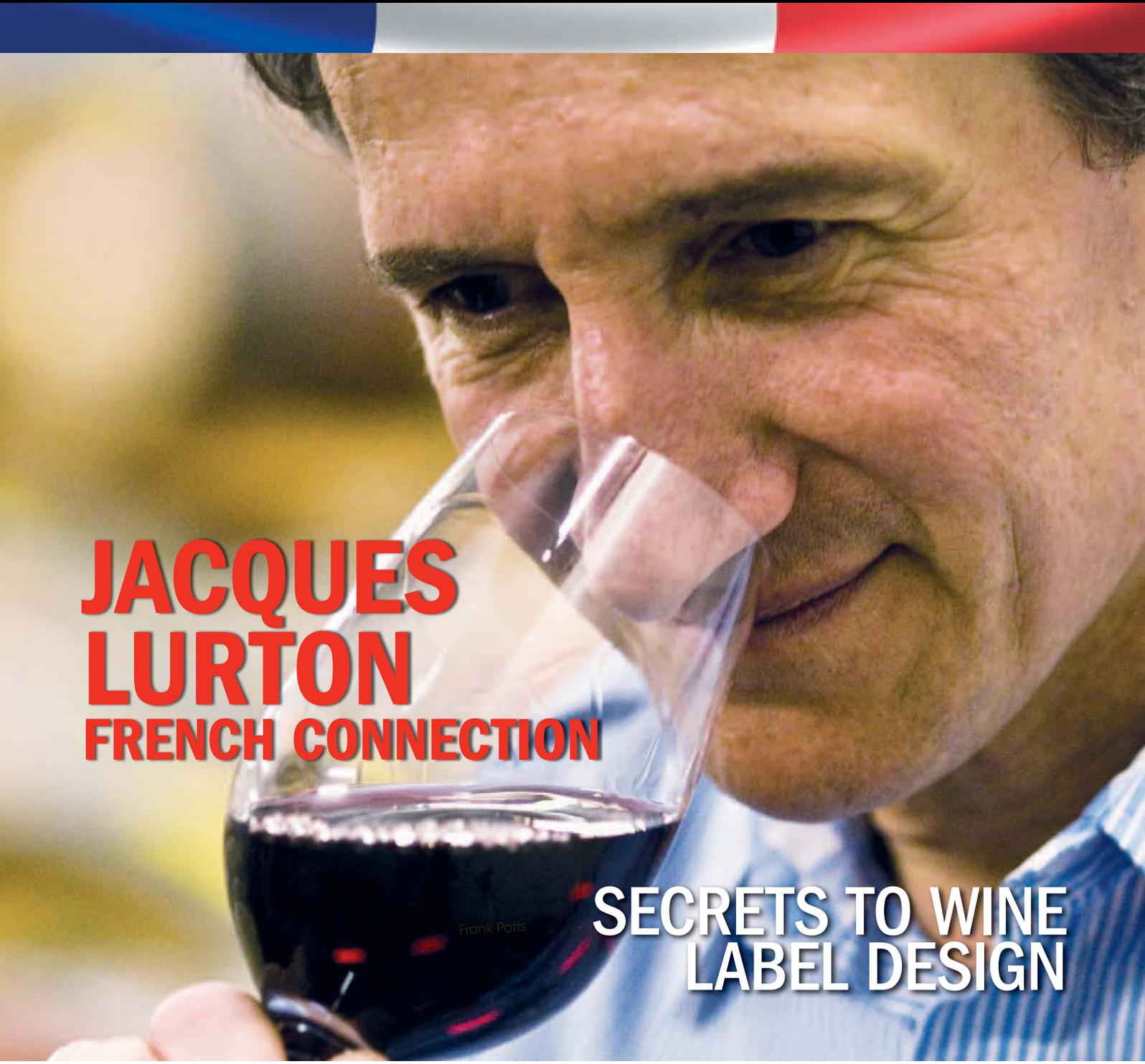
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**JACQUES
LURTON**
FRENCH CONNECTION

SECRETS TO WINE
LABEL DESIGN

Frank Potts

Anthony Madigan

Bordeaux-based flying winemaker Jacques Lurton has completed 21 vintages in Australia, but his first back in 1984, at McWilliams winery in Griffith, was his most memorable – not for any wines he made but for his introduction to the Australian bush lifestyle. He lived with a winery worker's family who treated him like a son, even taking him to lawn bowls on weekends.

"I loved that bowling playing and going to the bar afterwards," Jacques says. "I was with this large guy, you see, and he drank 16 beers in one evening – I didn't even know what a beer was, I'd never drunk one before because in my family it was forbidden. I know people who would have said, 'Oh they were rough over there in Australia, they were not so sophisticated,' but for me it fitted my mentality, they were humble people and I love that kind of attitude. I saw the real Australia and I've loved the country ever since."

Jacques has come a long way from the bowling greens of Griffith. He is one of the world's most famous flying winemakers and was recently named in Andrew Jefford's list of Australia's 12 best winemakers. Since graduating from Bordeaux University in 1983 he has made wine in 25 regions in 10 countries across 60 vintages. The country closest to his heart, after France, is Australia – his second home for two months of the year. During a honeymoon with his wife Francois in 1997, his mentor Brian Croser and Martin Shaw recommended they visit Kangaroo Island. They traversed every road on the island and crossed them all off on a map – "the French way," says Jacques – and in 2000, with help from McLaren Vale's David Paxton, Jacques found his terroir, planted vines and built a winery, importing sorting tables and vats from France.

At the time of establishing The Islander Estate Vineyards (IEV) Jacques was still involved in business interests with his brother Francois in Argentina, Chile, France and Spain. Seven years later Jacques sold his share to focus on Kangaroo Island and his own labels in France – Jacques Lurton Sauvignon Blanc (AOC Touraine, Loire Valley), Jacques Lurton Pouilly Fume, and Domaine de la Martinette Merlot from his home vineyard in Bordeaux.

One thing holding Australia back as a fine wine nation is that the wrong varieties have been planted in the wrong locations. Jacques chose carefully. "When I planted on Kangaroo Island it was with a well-defined concept of the wine style I wanted to produce," says Jacques. "My reasoning was based on the selection of the soil, the climate, the aesthetics of the place, the method of production which does not compromise the quality, and the principle that a high-class wine must be the result of a natural balance of all its components."

Jacques' Australian vineyard was always going to be in a cooler region (he had originally looked at the Adelaide Hills) in keeping with his philosophy of allowing natural acid and tannin to be a wine's driving elements. He has always made medium bodied wines of elegance and finesse – but built to last – which Aussie winemakers are now clamouring to make as the food-wine revolution sweeps the world. He stuck to his guns despite indifference to his wine style from some quarters. "My wines have always been delicate and refined, but I had many difficulties penetrating the domestic market because they seemed too light in style for the gatekeepers," Jacques says. "The same with wine shows – Australia is recognised for big, juicy, fruity wines. But I think the increase in imported wines into Australia with their generally lighter styles, will be an awakening for this country." His wines spend up to three years in barrel and a few years in bottle and are released when they are ready to drink. "This concept is contrary to many Australian wines which are marketed with the yeasts having hardly finished their work," Jacques says.

He says Australia is on the right track with its regional promotions but thinks they can be enhanced if winemakers start talking about things other than the actual winemaking. "They need to start talking about the land, the beauty of the land, the soils, the sense of place and the human element," Jacques says. "There's a technical focus here, which is important, but what Australia can learn from Europe is to bring into the wine all those ingredients that are not technical – cultural, historical, human – the consumer's not going to taste these





FRENCH 
CONNECTION

things, but he's going to relate to them."

Jacques is not a fan of single varietal wines. "Except when the result is as in Burgundy – from a soil that has been defined for several centuries – as they often miss balance and harmony," he says. "The marriage of varieties makes it possible to better express the soil and create a style."

His close-planted 11ha KI vineyard has Cabernet Franc, Sangiovese, Malbec, Semillon, Viognier, Grenache and Shiraz with a small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon. Jacques has always enjoyed the freedom of making wine in Australia without the regulations enforced in Europe. His flagship blend, Yakka Jack, is a Cabernet Franc Sangiovese.

It's ironic that a Frenchman is probably Kangaroo Island's most enthusiastic ambassador – Jacques is struck by the natural beauty of the island and doesn't leave home without his Powerpoint presentation of KI images. He promotes his association with a pristine environment and a clean, pure vineyard. "For export markets Kangaroo Island is a great name because

people are fascinated by the island factor and want to know more," Jacques says. "I stress the Kangaroo Island factor because I want to disassociate myself from mass wines. Unfortunately, despite there being fantastic small producers here, Australia is still seen as an entry-level wine producer, so I must promote Kangaroo Island first, Australia second. Australia needs to do more to promote smaller producers. In Bordeaux the smaller wineries with the highest quality wine are better known than the large ones; in this country it's the other way round."

Being away from home for 250 days a year Jacques has a good handle on the state of the various recovering economies. He says many Bordeaux producers are in trouble and Spain is also struggling, but America is showing signs of recovery with more orders for US\$20 a bottle coming in. Jacques is excited about China; when he decided to ramp up IEV exports five years ago it's the first place he went. "I arrived a little early back then as the Chinese did not have the passion for wine which they

have developed greatly in just the past two years," he says. "I continue my efforts in this completely disorganised but attractive, enthralling market that I consider for Australia to be the most important of all the large markets, because it is the closest.

"It's important to understand the culture and the buying attitudes and drinking habits by visiting the importer and his clients regularly in various provinces. I must say that my distributor likes me because I am French, and even better because I am from Bordeaux. In China, French and Bordeaux are synonymous with wine – they represent quality and trust. In fact for the 2009 *en primeur* campaign from Bordeaux the Chinese have bought 20% of the volume, but because they only purchased the first growths they have bought 60% of the value."

Jacques says the popularity of his French wines in China opens doors for his Kangaroo Island wines. He is now sharing with two other French companies a permanent employee (French and fluent in Chinese) based in Zhuhai, near Macau.

My mate Len

By Jacques Lurton



Before going to Australia for the first time in 1984, I contacted the only two people my father André Lurton knew in the Australian wine industry. One was Len Evans, who my father had visited in the Hunter at end of the 1970s and who returned to visit André in Bordeaux.

The other was Doug McWilliam, who had come to visit La Louvière a few years beforehand.

Doug answered me immediately and I agreed to go to work in his cellar at Yenda in NSW, but I never had news from Len. At the end of the harvest in Griffith I went to visit an English friend who worked the vintage with Rothbury Estate in the Hunter. After visiting the cellar he took me to a house where he stayed, and it turned out to be Len Evans' incredible home, Loggerheads.

I arrived and presented myself but Len did not pay any attention to my name because I certainly pronounced it very badly with my bad accent. Discussion started around the table, then Len said to me, "Jacques, you are from Bordeaux, very well, but I have a good friend in Bordeaux who is called André Lurton." I said to him, "I also know him very well because he is my father." Len collapsed from laughing, then became irritated and straightforwardly insulted me for not having told him my name earlier, and especially for not having written to him before coming to Australia because he would have found me a vintage in a place "more civilised" than the Murrumbidgee

Irrigation Area (which at that time was well-known for its plantation of cannabis).

I told Len that I had written, but not had an answer. And it was only when I arrived in Australia that I found out why. When I took the business card my father gave me, I saw marked, 'New some thing', because 'South Wales' was not well printed, and as I knew nothing about the geography of this part of the world, I marked on the letter "New Zealand", and it is why my letter has never found its recipient. This history made Len laugh so much and certainly with each meeting we had since, it was always retold. We became extremely good friends thereafter.

In 2000 when I invested in Kangaroo Island and announced it to Len by email, he just replied, "Kangaroo Island, certainly a bit of flair." But when in August 2006 – a week before he passed away – Len came with his lovely wife and a couple of friends to spend one week with me, I received from him one of the most beautiful comments about my wine that one could hope for.

We spent an afternoon in my house at Island Beach and I served Wally White 2005, my first Kangaroo Island white wine. He drank the first sip without anything to say, then looked at the bottle and served another glass, then another and still another, and after more than one hour when he had finished the bottle by himself, he simply said with an air of great suffering, "Bloody good wine."

Many vintages ago Jacques imported corks into Australia, a good business which enabled him to later invest in vineyards. He is a strong supporter of screwcaps and aside from the flagship release and some special requests for wine under cork, it's all screwcaps for The Islander. "One day in Hong Kong I went to lunch at a high end Italian restaurant and my friend brought two bottles of Chateau Gazin 86, from Pomerol. Not that we were ready to drink two bottles, but he brought two just in case one was corked. He was right – the first bottle was corked," Jacques says. "This wine is worth more than 1,000 euros on the market today! I tell this story in the trade to highlight how ridiculous the scenario is where you have to bring two bottles of anything or send multiple bottles to critics 'just in case'."

Jacques says he has met "many fantastic people" in the global wine trade and he puts some of that down to showing genuine interest in the various communities in which he makes wine, and learning the local language is part of that assimilation process (his English is near-faultless). His interest in KI is reflected in the names of the wines. Jacques' 300-hectare farm near Parndana in the 'Heartland District' of Kangaroo Island, has strong links to soldier settlement following World War 2. He was moved by stories of what the soldier settlers went through. They faced food shortages and a lack of government assistance, along with delays waiting for land grants to be approved, and families lived in camps. The land they had to clear was full of yakkas, gums and scrub. Jacques named the 'Old Rowley' after Rowland Hill who was the key instigator in pushing for soldier settlement and an advocate for better services and treatment for the families; 'Majestic Plough' after the South Australian-designed plough which was effective in clearing the yakkas and 'Bark Hut Rd' for the dirt track on which the farm is located and one of the first sites for soldier settler camps.

Jacques is adamant that any wine package must match the quality of the contents. "With my business there must be no compromises with the style of the wine, and the packaging *must* be beautiful," he insists. The IEV logo is a subtle image of a fairy penguin, a tourist drawcard on the island, and is the colour of the road the winery is on. A graphic designer came up with a sea lion image but

Building the brand ...



Jacques Lurton's Kangaroo Island wines originally consisted of just the Estate Range – Yakka Jack Cabernet Franc Sangiovese, Bark Hut Rd Cabernet Shiraz Viognier, Old Rowley Grenache Shiraz Viognier, Majestic Plough Malbec and Wally White Semillon Viognier. The range had critical acclaim in its early years, but it was a serious challenge to get sales with wines at a premium price point (up to \$50 retail and \$75 for Yakka Jack) from a largely unknown wine region.

To complement these wines an entry level range was introduced, The Islander Varietal Range, the packaging of which is consistent with the Estate Range. It includes a Shiraz, Chardonnay and Sangiovese (under \$20).

"Those wines give us an opportunity for volume sales and to introduce people to the brand," says Jacques' man in Australia, Rhys Howlett. "The Sangio is 100% Kangaroo Island fruit but the Shiraz and Chardonnay blend KI and mainland fruit to achieve the volumes we require and satisfy domestic and export markets. These are labeled GI 'South Australia' and have been very successful.

"Retailers will often have about five 'go-to' wines under \$20 – I want the Varietal Range to be one of those wines and hope it builds interest in our brand and encourages people to buy up to the Estate Range. We also have the great opportunity to offer Jacques' French wines. These wines, the Sauvignon Blanc in particular, open doors and build the Jacques Lurton/Islander Estate brand. Our margins are pretty tight on these wines to keep them under \$25 retail (Sauv Blanc and Merlot that is – Pouilly Fume will be up around \$55) but they are proving successful for us. To have access to these wines is such a bonus for us.

"Part of my focus has been to tighten the wine list – line-pricing of the Varietal (cellar door under \$20), Estate (\$37 – previously there were three different price points for four wines, varying only a couple of dollars) and Imported Range (\$22) with the flagship standing alone at \$60. Previously there were too many price points. We offer consistent pricing with a clear and consistent message – The Islander Estate and Jacques Lurton, always linked together – and it's proving successful."

Rhys says it's a challenge as a young wine region competing with established regions. "SA is our hardest market because there is

just so much competition from areas which people have much greater access and exposure to," he says. "This makes employment of social media all the more important for us and although we were slow to engage, we're on board now and we see huge potential in the opportunities it presents. KI is a very big island so what it can offer the cellar door tourist is so far removed from, for example, the Adelaide Hills 20 minutes up the freeway, or the Barossa and McLaren Vale with dozens of cellar doors within walking distance of each other. We offer tours and tastings that are an excellent way of introducing people to the vineyard and barrel shed and create a more intimate and unique experience with the wine. But we don't have a traditional cellar door because the foot traffic can't justify the expense."

Rhys says exports have traditionally been the backbone of the business but with the Aussie dollar so strong, demand has slowed and they are focusing much more on the domestic market. "It's incredibly important that we have good brand recognition, peer respect and sales in our own country – some of the biggest selling Australian wines in various markets around the world are never heard of or sold in Australia," he says. "That's going to be a long process but it's the only way to do it – hard work, knocking on as many doors as possible and showing interesting, delicious wines that offer great value and an enjoyable drinking experience."

The Islander Estate Vineyards received a major boost to its profile this year when it supplied 576,000 187ml bottle to Emirates. Jacques Lurton has many connections across the world, which proved beneficial on this occasion. "Jacques has a commission agent for the Middle East based in France, an Englishman named James Ryland," Rhys explains. "He used to work for Jacques' father André Lurton and also spent four years in Dubai, so he is well connected with relevant buyers there – Dubai has a small number of key gatekeepers to the market. We submitted a tender, were successful, and exported 576,000 x 187ml bottles for Emirates economy class. To satisfy that volume we needed to source material to blend with our KI wine. The end result was a blend of KI and Coonawarra Shiraz, labelled 'South Australia' and which we hope has proved successful as a positive introduction to our brand."

it didn't look right and Jacques stumbled on a better idea after taking friends to the fairy penguin colony at Penneshaw. "There was a cute little penguin on this walkway and I went closer to take a picture and it stepped back and fell backwards off the walkway. It didn't move for a while, but it was okay, it only fell about a metre," Jacques smiles. "My friends thought it was very funny and they still talk about it – after that, my logo just *had* to be a penguin."

Kangaroo Island has stalled as a wine region after being hailed as the next best thing 10 years ago. Jacques concedes it will only ever be a niche producer of high-quality wines in modest quantities. "I think it can be a little Burgundy," he says. The major challenge is isolation. Freight is expensive and Duncan MacGillivray, ex Longview Vineyards and now KI Pure Grain managing director, and a KI lobby group which IEV is part of, are acting to change this. And the population is small, making it hard to find vineyard workers.

Jacques loves the Australian landscape and feels at home here. "I love the shape of the eucalyptus trees and the deserts; I find

them so peaceful and relaxing," he says. "I also love the pioneering spirit of Australia – there is still the sense that you can start something new – in Europe there is *nothing* you can start again, everything has been explored, and anyway if you want to start something new you get so bothered by the authorities. When I get on the plane in Paris to come to Australia I feel free already. I'm going somewhere where I'm going to feel welcome. And when I fly from Hong Kong to Australia and look at this land from above, there's an attraction that I feel. I've read a lot about the Aborigines and they always talk about energy; there's energy in this country. Maybe I've found a country that is in balance with who I am."

Jacques is prepared to be patient with his Australian venture, and time is on his side; despite everything he's achieved he's still only 51 years old. "A year ago I was chatting to David Paxton about the difficulty of the wine business and I told him I'm prepared to fight to the death, because the day you have found a place like Kangaroo Island is the day you have found peace and happiness. And that's worth fighting for."

JACQUES LURTON'S VINTAGE RECORD

France: Alsace, Burgundy, Loire, Bordeaux, Gascony, Languedoc, Corsica.

Italy: Piedmont and Basilicata (6 vintages all together).

Spain: Rueda, Toro, Ribera del Duero (18 vintages).

Portugal: Duero (4 vintages).

Moldova: (3 vintages).

California: Napa (1 vintage).

Uruguay: Montevideo (5 vintages).

Argentina: Mendoza (16 vintages).

Chile: Molina, Santa Cruz, Casablanca (14 vintages).

Australia: McLaren Vale, Kangaroo Island, Griffith, Adelaide Hills (21 vintages).

barrel master

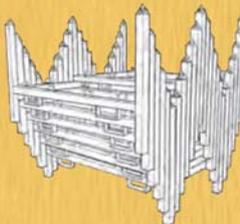
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