



Head for the Hilltops.

Grove Estate displays signs of love for Italian styles.

The New South Wales wine region of Hilltops is fast gaining momentum and attention for its wines. We chat to three local producers to hear what's happening on the ground.

Words Fergal Gleeson.

The words 'emerging' and 'up and coming' are often used to describe the New South Wales wine region of Hilltops. While the first vines were planted at the time of the gold rush, modern viticulture started in the 1960s, and yet this tiny wine-producing region, with the town of Young at its heart, remained largely undiscovered until recent times. Now, its wines are increasingly recognised by critics and wine shows, and sought out by people seeking interesting, cool climate wines.



Freeman Vineyards.

Dr Brian Freeman of Freeman Vineyards has a vision for the Hilltops region that is inspired by Italy. He first fell in love with Italian wine 20 years ago at a tasting at Charles Sturt University, where he lectured in wine science, and that discovery drove him to establish Freeman Vineyards in 1999.

"The Hilltops is still finding its feet," he says. "We make good cabernet and shiraz here, but the challenge in establishing the region's identity is that so many Australian regions also [excel in these two grape varieties]. I think there is a real opportunity to build a reputation around Italian varieties that grow so well here."

Brian has the only Australian plantings of corvina and rondinella – the classic Valpolicella varieties that originate in the Veneto in northern Italy – and produces a trio of reds from them. The 2015 Freeman Corona is a bright and breezy Italian-style red, which is moreish and refreshing. Then there are the two Amarone-style wines, made by partially drying the grapes in his neighbour's prune dehydrator before the wines age for two years in old oak barrels, and two more in bottle before release. Drying the grapes concentrates not only flavour, but also tannin and acid, which means the wines are not immediately drinkable, but seriously ageworthy. While Brian concedes this is not "commercially sensible" it does reflect his assiduous quality focus.

What does an Australian 'Amarone' taste like? The 2012 Freeman Secco is stern and savoury; texture, tar and tobacco flavours are the key. The 2012 Freeman Robusta is the flagship and it is an epic wine, tasting of chocolate and Christmas pudding, but finishing dry and savoury. It's a treat.

Also in the range is the Freeman Rondo Rosé, made from these same varieties, as well as an excellent Nebbiolo, Sangiovese and Pinot Grigio.



Grove Estate.

The love for Italian styles continues at Grove Estate, where general manager Brian Mullany is also passionate about these grape varieties. "We planted primitivo back in 1996, inspired by Cape Mentelle's Zinfandel. In 2000 we made further plantings of barbera, sangiovese and nebbiolo. Back

then, people had no idea about Italian varietals at wine shows. We were pretty much growing them for ourselves to drink!" Brian says. "I really enjoy barbera. In The Italian [Grove Estate's blend of nebbiolo, sangiovese and barbera] it adds depth, dark chocolate and a beautiful complexity." The Italian is a satisfying mid-weight wine that will convert pinot lovers, such is its silky, smooth texture and aromatics. "Since 2006 we've made our Nebbiolo in a lighter style and it's more and more exciting," he says. "It's now our most sought-after wine. Nebbiolo is a pleasure to grow in the Hilltops; it is early budding so we have to thin it so as not to overproduce. We grow it on the top of the hills to get away from frost. I'd love to win a Jimmy Watson with a Nebbiolo!" In addition to these Italian varietals, look out for their Shiraz Viognier, made by none other than Tim Kirk of Clonakilla. It is a frequent gold medal and trophy winner.



Brian believes Hilltops' point of difference is that it can ripen red wines consistently, unlike some cooler climate regions. "Hilltops has a very similar climate to Adelaide Hills and would probably be as famous if it was in South Australia. I've got a vine from 1860 from Dalmatia in the former Yugoslavia so there is history, but along the way, vines got pushed out by cherry growers. The vines are now making a comeback."



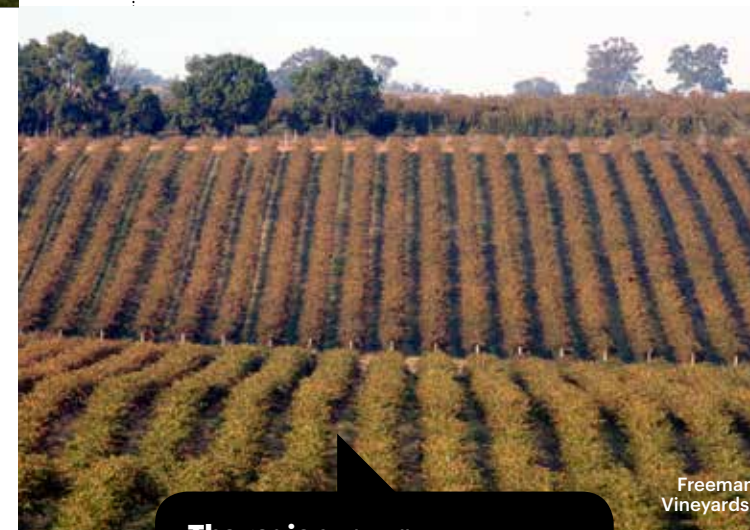
Moppity Vineyards.

Joint owner of Moppity Vineyards Jason Brown is bullish about the region's future, explaining they have a climatic advantage. "Hilltops is at the warmer end of 'cool climate' with a high diurnal temperature range. This means the wines have a richness to them, but also the elegance, perfume and acidity of a cool climate," Jason says.

Jason is, however, reluctant to see Hilltops pigeon-holed to a particular set of varieties. "We are too young as a winemaking nation to retro-fit this region. We should explore and trial Spanish, Italian and Portuguese varieties. For example, we've only had two vintages of our Lock & Key Tempranillo, but they are not just the most awarded tempranillos in the country, they are also the most awarded of any variety. We've recently grafted over the last of our chardonnay in Hilltops with tempranillo, sangiovese and nebbiolo. There are 1600 wine varieties out there that are largely unnoticed and untouched."

The Moppity Escalier Shiraz is the most personal wine for Jason in the portfolio. "The concept has been in the making since we bought the vineyards," he says. "Through a gradual process of evolution and refinement, we really did demonstrate all that we can offer in the 2013." Moppity has won The Great Australian Shiraz Challenge twice with this wine and is the most decorated winery in the region. All four of Moppity's cabernets, from entry level to Reserve, won gold at the 2015 Royal Hobart Wine Show.

"Unlike some regions, we're not going to thrive because we're close to a large population. We have to produce wine that is much better than anybody else. Hilltops is small and always going to be tightly held, but consumers have picked up on the region." ●



Freeman Vineyards.

The region. The Hilltops region is about 3.5 hours' drive south-west of Sydney, and about 1.5 hours north-west of Canberra. Known for its orchards, particularly cherries and stone fruits, the region also has around 13 wine producers and a handful of cellar doors, including Chalkers Crossing, Grove Estate, Ballinaclash Cellar Door and Freeman Vineyards.