

Statement of origin

A family-owned Coonawarra winery sticks to its boundaries with great effect.



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Watching the artistry of a butcher at Victor Churchill Meats in Woollahra recently, wine trade guests were fascinated by some gems of information regarding authenticity. Butcher David Ellis casually informed us, while he trussed a standing rib roast of beef, that the wagyu beef burgers one commonly sees in cafes these days only have to be 50 per cent wagyu. The rest can be anything. Then later, as he was trimming the fat from a Kurobuta pork roast, came the news that cattle only have to spend their last 70 days on a certain "name" pasture, such as King Island, for their meat to be sold with that branding.

Although Australian wine has long ago cleaned up its act with regard to labelling integrity, there are still parallels in the wider world. For instance, Italy's comparatively recent Indicazione Geografica Tipica law seems to make a specific claim for regional authenticity but such wines can have as little as 51 per cent grapes from the stated place. So drinkers who trust IGT

Sicilia to be precisely that, have a reason to feel betrayed.

No such problem with the wine we tasted that night, at a table set up on the butchery floor. Leconfield, of Coonawarra, makes very good cabernet sauvignon, riesling and merlot sourced only from its own vineyard in the heart of Coonawarra—a region that has a clearly defined boundary, although it took a lot of heartache to establish it 10 years ago.

Many would argue there's too much inferior land permitted the appellation but at least systems are in place to guarantee that wine labelled Coonawarra cabernet sauvignon is at least 85 per cent Coonawarra and 85 per cent cabernet sauvignon.

I've had a soft spot for Leconfield since one of my first visits to Coonawarra about 1978, when Sydney Hamilton, who founded the vineyard at the ripe old age of 76, was still alive. Syd achieved immortality when he labelled an early Leconfield wine "Hand picked by experienced women". He was also noted for his penchant for doing tractor work dressed in a suit and tie.

Some of the early cabernets were superb but they went into a bit of a hole in the '90s when they were often green and underripe. Leconfield is at the cooler, southern end of the cigar-shaped terra rossa strip and its style was always one of



Close to the source ... Leconfield winemaker Paul Gordon; (below left) the 2009 cabernet sauvignon. Photo: Wolter Peeters

Coonawarra's more elegant cabernets but green is green and it was too often thus.

Things began to look up when ex-Rouge Homme winemaker Paul Gordon took over in 2002—notwithstanding the '02 cabernet, which still tastes hard and astringent, and always will.

Gordon was well-drilled in the Lindemans camp and is a quality winemaker. He was

horrified to discover Leconfield didn't own a crusher/destemmer, a basic item of equipment in any winery. His first action was to convince the owner, Richard Hamilton, that he needed one. Until then, stalks went into the fermenters, adding green elements to the wine.

He also implemented other small changes that have had an important effect, such as pH control,

sterile filtration and adding sulphur dioxide to the fresh grapes as soon as they're harvested to enhance freshness and colour and as the first step in preventing *Brettanomyces* spoilage. As well, the fruit sourcing for the flagship cabernet sauvignon is almost entirely the oldest plantings, with the more minty/herbal fruit from younger vines going into the lower-priced, but still very good, Leconfield cabernet merlot.

Gordon has also increased the proportion of barrel fermentation—which is where the wine finishes its fermentation in barrels, resulting in a richer texture and more seamless integration of oak flavours. And, in some years, such as '09, extended time on skins post-fermentation is used on some batches. This tends to help soften the tannins.

"I've been at Leconfield for 11 years and I see my job as improving the breed," Gordon

says. "The improvements are small but they add up and they can make a difference."

The Leconfield cabernet sauvignon, first made in 1977, regularly wins gold medals at the major shows, as does the Leconfield merlot. The 2010 merlot, released last week at \$25, won the trophy for the best merlot in the Royal Queensland Wine Show a month ago. As for the cabernets, the '09 (\$33.50) is a lovely wine of classic Leconfield elegance, bright colour, sweetly ripe berry aromas and soft, fine tannins; a well-balanced cabernet that's arguably a touch richer and more concentrated than usual. It will drink well for at least 20 years.

Leconfield is still 100 per cent family owned, by the Hamiltons, and still flying the flag for quality Coonawarra wines. And, yes, its cabernet does go rather well with a grilled Cape Grim sirloin steak from Victor Churchill's.

