

Hunter Valley spotlight

Brokenwood Estate Winery

It takes barely a sip of wine to get PJ Charteris, a thoughtful sort of bloke, reflecting on the big questions of life, love and grapes.

"What I often wonder," says the Brokenwood winemaker, leaning one elbow on the bench in his Hunter Valley tasting room, "is what makes old vines special? Why do wines from old vines taste so magical, so different? Is it the fact that they're old, that they've lived so long? Or is it that good vines are the ones that survive; the ones that don't get ripped out?"

It's a pertinent question, given that Charteris and his buddies at Brokenwood make one of Australia's most famous and awarded wines – Graveyard Shiraz – from some of our oldest vines, in the heart of an industry where competition is fierce, standards are high and dud vines get no mercy. The vines, by the way, don't look terribly impressive today, as Charteris strides around, trailed by two vineyard dogs and one enthusiastic stray.

A vineyard worker, Peter Cooke, is clipping off any sticklet or leafette cheeky enough to be clinging on. But according to the nation's wine

critics, these scrappy, winter-starved plants have something special. It might be age. It might just be determination. They were planted in 1969, grown from clippings brought to Australia from France in the 1830s. They thrived in the windy, watery, unpredictable Hunter climate – and now they're the only survivors. The original vines, in Burgundy, were wiped out by a nasty little bug called phylloxera in the 1880s – so now the Hunter Valley has some of the world's most elderly shiraz.

The whole concept seems to make Charteris a little nervous; a reminder

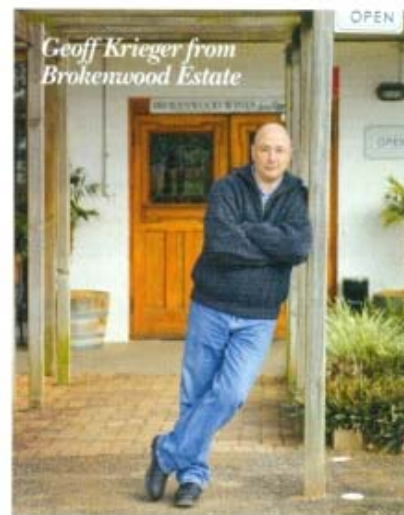
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that the business he's chosen is temperamental, ephemeral and terrifyingly intangible.

"It's always impossible to really explain why some areas produce certain wines; it's a combination of the site, the soil and the humans. The vine is the conduit between the two – but it might be more than that. I just don't know."

Once, shiraz was known as Hunter River Burgundy and the staple crop of the region.

Then came chardonnay, the oaky, savoury flavour that enthralled Australians for so long – but shiraz is on the way back.



"We also make Baby Graveyard," says Geoff Krieger, Brokenwood's general manager. "We don't actually call it that on the labels, though."

Under the more marketing-friendly name Hunter Valley Shiraz, the Baby Graveyard is cheaper and more plentiful than the grown-up Graveyard. Brokenwood likes nurturing babies; every year they recruit the dux of Adelaide University's oenology course and put him or her to work for a season.

The last one was nicknamed Brains. Actually, they're all called Brains, male or female; a little joke for the winemakers. ➔

