



THE HERITAGE PROJECT

Text by Alex Miller, Viticultural Technical Officer.

If you really want to pursue wine excellence, you have to learn to be patient. You have to be prepared to look well into the future and it is years before you know whether the decisions you make today are the right ones.

Grapevines need at least three years to grow into their first vintage, and usually it is more like four or five. They will improve with time, but quite often they do not mature to their optimal fruit quality for 20 years or more.

Within our Estate we have a particular block affectionately known as the Old Block, a section of Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1978 that each year produces exceptional fruit. You might know it from our Tom Price and Old Block wines. With 40 years age, these vines are some of the oldest Cabernet Sauvignon in the region. Knowing how special the block is, and with a focus on continual vineyard improvement, we have been experimenting with creating our own clones from the best performing vines in this block, to be used as 'mother vines' for future vineyards and the regeneration of old ones.

Contrary to the popular myth that says the best vines are the oldest, vines do actually have an optimum productive life, which can be anywhere from 30-70 years. They may soldier on as a living thing for centuries, but their ability to produce any volume of consistently high quality fruit will decline in their twilight years. If a wine is celebrated because of its exceptional quality vines and you know that the vines won't last forever, it doesn't take a genius to work out that the future of that wine could be under threat if you don't do something.

It makes sense to clone the old generation because these vines have already proven to perform in our current climatic conditions and to marry so well with the sub-region's soils. A preferred characteristic of great wine-growing soil is a sub-soil component that allows the slow release of moisture to the vines. Too much water will see the vine grow too vigorously and reduce the flavour concentration of the grapes. Too little, and the vines will become weak and stressed. Our stony-clay sub-soil is ideal for the right balance.

Our focus on research and development in the vineyard is also aimed at fast tracking our learning around the changing climatic conditions. We are harvesting our grapes 3-4 weeks earlier than 15 years ago, and many of our trials have been initiated to not only improve what we do but to also find ways to manage evolving seasonal conditions.

Building our knowledge of soils and climate at our site over the past 40 years spurred us on to start our Heritage Project, which began nearly three years ago. We set out to find the individual vines that were the strongest to start this new generation of Cabernet Sauvignon for us. Imagine you are trying to fill a job vacancy from a talented field of thousands of candidates - a daunting task that can only be done by including some rigorous testing.





For our vines, we did the same. We applied numerous tests to our 40-year-old vines and progressively eliminated the weaker candidates. We can't tell you the nature of our specific tests - that's top secret stuff! But we can tell you the final test was the most important of all - taste.

This involved hand-harvesting the grape bunches from our short-listed vines and we made individual wines from each of them. The winemakers have never had to make such small quantities before, with each one producing no more than a bottle. The wines were then tasted blind and, interestingly, all had very similar results. We had found the best of the best, three vines from almost 4,000, which passed every test we could throw at them.

We selected the healthiest canes from each of the three vines and during pruning season made cuttings which we have nurtured in our nursery until they were strong enough to plant in a patch of vineyard alongside the Old Block.

It's expected the vines will thrive because they will share the same soil that has proven so nutritious for the 'mother vines'.

When you next visit us, the new vines may not look that impressive but don't be fooled - we have every reason to believe they will be the future of our best Cabernet Sauvignon, even though we may not know for a couple of decades whether we are right or not. However, we will make experimental batches from them in their early years to see how they develop and hopefully they will find their way into our top Cabernet wines soon. It's a case of watch this space - but just don't ask us to hurry!

