WINEMAKER OF THE YEAR 2012

It’s time to meet the first four finalists from this year’s compelling field of talent.

By the end of the 15th year of presenting this major Australian award, Gourmet Traveller WINE will have told the story of more than 120 women and men who have graced this country’s landscape transforming quality grapes into wines that have ranged from daringly cutting edge to dazzlingly traditional, from superb to sublime: bubbles, whites and reds across the full spectrum, stickies and fortifieds.

These are hard years for the industry, but our awards focus on the good-news stories, placing the spotlight on individuals, telling about those with whom they have toiled and the wineries and regions in which they work.

The judges are a constant, comprising myself Peter Forrestal (chairman), Peter Bourne, Nick Bulleid MW, Andrew Caillard MW, Huon Hooke and Sophie Otton. We have concentrated on the quality of wines produced in the recent past – 18 months or so. We all taste exhaustively, regularly noting wines that have stopped us in our tracks and the winemakers who have crafted them.

Two of the winemakers who are reviewed in this issue have already been finalists, Sandro Mosele in 2005 and Virginia Willcock in 2010. Mosele has attracted further attention because of the refinements he’s made to his single-site chardonnays and pinots, as well as the work he’s done on Italian varieties. Willcock has been largely responsible for the continued rise of Vasse Felix and has carried all before her on the show circuit in the last few years, especially with her breathtakingly complex 2010 Vasse Felix Heytesbury Chardonnay.

An almost obsessive preoccupation with the vineyard is a feature of both of the first-time finalists profiled here: Rob Mann of Cape Mentelle and Timo Mayer of Gembrook Hill and his own label, Mayer. Interestingly, both winemakers have family backgrounds in wine that stretch back more than 100 years and their stories make compelling reading.

PETER FORRESTAL
VINCENT WILLCOCK
Vasse Felix

Second-time finalist Virginia Willcock is renowned for her energy, passion and attention to detail. And of course her incredible Margaret River wines speak for themselves, particularly her Heytesbury Chardonnay.

“Vasse Felix is a vinous gem, shining better than ever in the creative hands of Virginia Willcock. Precision, vigour and drive are the hallmarks of her Heytesbury wines – and indeed, Willcock herself.”

Most of our fermentations aren’t inoculated, including all the chardonnay and the premium shiraz, cabernet and malbec – so just the yeast from the vineyard. We have responsibilities and with our love of the Margaret River region it’s very easy to nurture the vines as part of their environment."

Matching grape variety to soil type and then using the right canopy management has been a keen thrust for Willcock. She remembers walking around the vineyard not long after arriving and saying, “What’s that doing there? Pull it out!”

Paul Holmes a Court hesitated when I asked him about his colleague at Vasse Felix, "because there’s so much to say. She’s passionate. She really does care about the end product and giving everything attention to detail. Before we appointed her, I could see what she’d do in other jobs with limited resources and was determined to give her the chance to show what she could really do. She believes you’re only as good as your worst wine. Passion, energy and detail – that pretty much sums her up.”

With all that being said, what challenges remain after achieving so much at Vasse Felix in six short years? "There’s never a day when we can’t find new things to do to get the most beautiful representation of Margaret River in the bottle," she replies. "I’d love to see the day when we can underline the uniqueness of each region, when we can drop the word 'Australia' from our labels and just have the regional name, with a less complicated range and stronger focus.”

It seems the past six years were just the beginning. Margaret River grapes couldn’t be in better hands.