YALUMBA

Yalumba planted three acres of viognier in 1979 as an experiment, and now has four wines built from 70 acres of the vine. The mature plantings go into The Virgilius, while some of the viognier is fermented together with shiraz to massive effect. In the 2000 Barossa 90% Shiraz + 10% Viognier, the co-fermentation seems to enhance the extract, while the wine maintains enough freshness to keep all that ripe plum and black currant flavor in line. Viognier is a natural companion to the old-vine shiraz Barossa has made famous; exploring its potential. Yalumba’s managing director Robert Hill Smith and winemaker Brian Walsh recently initiated an international viognier conference to promote research and discussion of the variety.

While Yalumba can claim to have the oldest viognier vines in the Southern Hemisphere, it can also claim to be the oldest family-owned winery in Australia. Robert is a direct descendent of Samuel Hill Smith, the brewer from Britain who founded Yalumba in 1849. His family can also claim to run the only winery in the Southern Hemisphere to cooper all its barrels, their cooperage established 80 years ago. The firm imports French and American oak, then seasons it for five to eight years (significantly longer than most commercially made barrels). The cooperage provides the small, 90-liter octaves for aging The Octavius, Yalumba’s top selection of old-vine shiraz.

The ‘99 Octavius is a Barossan beauty, a potent reservoir of floral, spicy fruit, all hidden for now within the smokiness of oak tannins.

Around the time they started planting viognier, the Hill Smith family established the Yalumba Nursery, which has grown into a successful business of its own. The winery is now self-sufficient when it comes to plant material, and the nursery gives them a means to introduce new material like the viognier and to propagate cuttings from old-vine stock. It’s a valuable resource with 1,200 acres of vines to grow.

Half of those vines are at Oxford Landing, a 655-acre vineyard on the Murray River that’s the namesake of Yalumba’s value-priced wines like the ’02 South Australia Oxford Landing Sauvignon Blanc...The vineyards also provide a base for the ‘Y Series’, just a small step up in price, offering fresh, clean values as well. Among the “Y”s, there’s a bright 2002 Riesling with light peach and pear flavor; and smooth reds like the berried 2001 Shiraz.

Most of the top wines, however, grow in old-vine plantings the Hill Smiths have collected in Barossa and Eden Valley. At the high-end of Yalumba’s production, Brian Walsh has emphasized blends of cabernet sauvignon and shiraz from these old vines. The ‘99 Signature balances sweet shiraz flavors of plum with fresher black currant cabernet (51 percent). The ’98 Reserve is plump and rich, less complex at the moment, but equally delicious. These deep reds need cellaring to bring the richness of Yalumba’s old-vine fruit to the fore.

- Joshua Greene