



# THE RIVER RUNS DEEP CULLEN WINES

Vanya Cullen is one of Australia's most respected producers. But neither she nor her groundbreaking mother intended to make wine her life's work. Sarah Ahmed explains the qualities that have taken them to the top

Photography courtesy of Cullen Wines

Not many iconic wineries with vineyards in one of the world's most prestigious wine regions choose to cut a swathe through production—from 20,000 to 15,000 cases, to be precise (about which more later). Still, Vanya Cullen, chief winemaker and CEO of Cullen Wines in Margaret River, Western Australia, looks remarkably relaxed—in fact, very pleased—with the decision.

Describing Cullen Wines' philosophy in three words: "quality, integrity, and sustainability," Cullen says her parents, founders Dr Kevin and Di Cullen, believed firmly in quality not quantity and what was best for the "brand" in this holistic sense. It is a legacy that leaves the business well placed to deal with the challenges affecting Australian producers today. While many have struggled to overcome the perception that Australia only makes commodity wines, Cullen Wines represents the very pinnacle of Australian winemaking prowess, because the family has not once rested on their laurels or deviated from their core values.

Looking to the future, a fresh challenge is the protection of the wines' long-term viability and quality in the face of climate change, an issue Cullen is confronting through a range of environmentally aware initiatives. Passion and a strong sense of responsibility to the land define her approach. Cullen truly believes that the family's vineyard in Wilyabrup is one of the great places in Australia to grow Cabernet Sauvignon. The panel that voted her Qantas Winemaker of the Year in 2000 agreed, describing the flagship Diana Madeline Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot as "simply the greatest wine of its style made in Australia"—a huge achievement given Margaret River's relatively brief winemaking history.

### From small acorns

While Western Australia may account for only 4 percent of Australia's crush, it punches well above its weight when it comes to quality, with around one quarter of the country's premium wine production. Tellingly, three of the 11 wines awarded exceptional status in Langton's Classification of Distinguished Australian Wine hail from the state's jewel in the crown, Margaret River: Cullen's Diana Madeline Cabernet/Merlot, Leeuwin Estate's Art Series Chardonnay, and Moss Wood's Cabernet Sauvignon.<sup>1</sup> For a region whose first plantings were established little over 40 years ago by amateurs—despite the Department of Agriculture's warning that grape growing for wine was neither an immediate practical possibility nor likely to be highly profitable—this is no mean feat.

The impetus for wine-grape plantings came from lupin expert Dr John Gladstones. Surrounded by water on three sides, Gladstones's reports of 1965 and 1966 concluded that Margaret River's maritime climate lent itself to great equability of temperature within the growing and ripening seasons. He reasoned that this, combined with its well-drained ironstone gravel soils, invited comparison with Bordeaux's Right Bank in a good vintage, given its drier ripening season.

Before his first report was even published, Gladstones was contacted by Dr Kevin Cullen about growing lupins on the family farm. Gladstones advised him to forget about lupins and plant vines instead. Kevin and his wife Di, a physiotherapist, wasted no time. They planted Margaret River's first experimental vines in 1966 and, excited by the implications of Gladstones's advice for what was then an economically depressed backwater, organized a public meeting attended by 100 or more at which Gladstones outlined his findings. By 1971, when the Cullens established the current vineyards off the Caves Road in

Wilyabrup, northerly Margaret River, two other doctors had successfully thrown their hats into the ring: Dr Tom Cullity of Vasse Felix and Dr Bill Pannell of Moss Wood. All three enjoyed rapid critical acclaim for their wines at the Royal Perth Show, and the rest, as they say, is history...

### Family values

The early success of these pioneers speaks volumes about the people and the place where they had chosen to plant their vines. While the Department of Agriculture may have been wrong about Margaret River's potential for wine-grape growing, its concern about profitability was not without foundation. Cullen Wines did not break even until 1994, following greater international recognition for Australian wines.

Cullen says her parents, who have now both passed away, had a tremendous work ethic and an unwavering commitment to quality. Initially advised by the Department of Agriculture that they should expect yields of just over 1 ton per acre, she says it was never about the money and less still short-term gain. Dry-farming for low yields from the outset, her parents seized the opportunity to create something special from their gravelly soils, taking France as their inspiration. With Cullity and Pannell, the Cullens sought to protect the integrity of Margaret River's wines in the 1970s through a voluntary certification of origin and quality-standard scheme. This was long before Australia's official Geographical Indications label-integrity scheme was implemented in 1994.

It was by no means plain sailing, since both parents juggled responsibilities. Her father, who was awarded the Order of Australia in 1994 for his contribution to community health, worked weekdays in Busselton to support the 2,000-acre sheep and cattle farm and 18-acre vineyard. Meantime, Di assumed day-to-day responsibility for the farm and vineyard while bringing up the couple's six children, who helped hoe, build fences, or plant at weekends. In and among, Di somehow also made time to be a founding member of the Margaret River Wine Industry Association and to campaign against logging and mining along the now protected stretch of coast between Cape Leeuwin and Cape Naturalist. Cullen can remember the family pulling out mining pegs on the beach.

When her mother additionally took on the winemaking role in 1981 aged 59, Vanya says it was because "there was really no one else to do it." Compared with the eastern states, the region was in its infancy, and with no wine school, there was a dearth of technical expertise. While self-taught, Di Cullen had a natural talent for winemaking. She was awarded the Order of Australia for services to the wine industry in 1999, and her list of achievements is lengthy. In addition to creating Cullen's flagship wines—a Cabernet/Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc/Semillon, and Chardonnay—she planted Western Australia's first Merlot and Cabernet Franc and pioneered oaked white wines. The debut wooded Sauvignon Blanc brought her the distinction of being the first woman to win a trophy at the Royal Perth Show.

### Like mother like daughter

With such formidably talented parents, Vanya Cullen, the youngest of the brood, stepped into large shoes when she succeeded her mother as chief winemaker in 1989 and took on the role of managing director in 1998. She has proved herself to be more than equal to the task, even though, like her mother, she never set out to be a winemaker.

After a first degree in zoology, she decided to study music in Adelaide (she is an accomplished mezzo soprano), only to be informed by her father that he had also booked her into Roseworthy Agricultural College's graduate Wine Diploma "because someone in the family needs to know about wine." While Cullen was none too amused at the time, she says the pattern was familiar. It was her father who pushed her to sing at family gatherings and who had the prescience to recognize that her passion for nature, creativity, and sense of duty boded well for the winery. He was right. Cullen is the only woman and Western Australian to have won the prestigious Qantas Winemaker

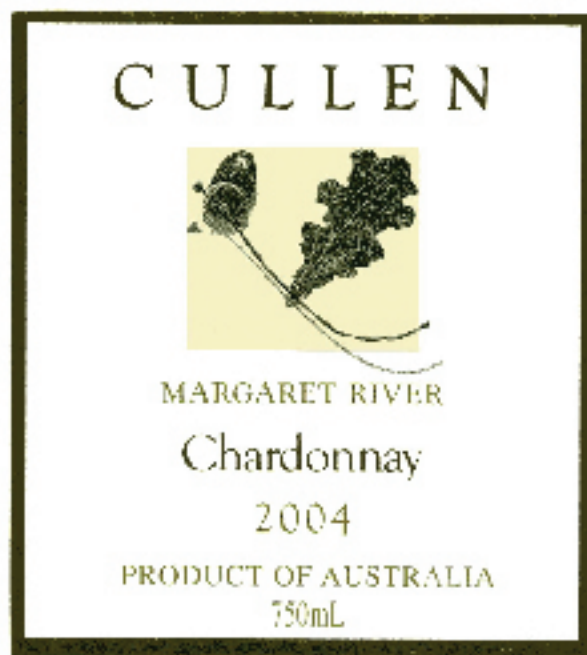
of the Year award. Hugely respected worldwide for her palate, she can lay claim to being the first woman to judge at the Royal Sydney Wine Show and to chair an Australian wine show (Yarra Valley).

Of her achievements, Cullen readily acknowledges that she had the good fortune to inherit a prime vineyard site. She modestly adds that she was not the brightest at school but says "persistence is 90 percent of it." No one can accuse Cullen of lack of it. Raising the bar has involved "working out the parameters of excellence through detailed experimentation" and bringing to bear her experience working vintages abroad and judging both nationally and internationally. This, together with the Cullen annual Chardonnay tasting—a blind tasting of international premium wines—has enabled her to benchmark her wines against the world's finest.

Under Cullen's careful regime of incremental changes, the Chardonnay has been elevated to the ranks of Australia's best. With wild-yeast fermentation since 1996, whole bunch pressing, and less reductive handling on solids, it has a longer finish and is more complete. As for the flagship Diana Madeline Cabernet/Merlot, Cullen has not been afraid to change the recipe for this iconic wine. Petit Verdot and Malbec planted on her brother's neighboring Mangan vineyard in 1996 have added greater texture, mouthfeel, and complexity to more recent vintages. And for its most important attribute, its signature fine-grained tannins, Cullen introduced the Scott Henry vine-training system and cane pruning for the red-wine grapes after working a vintage in New Zealand in 1983. She swears by this, combined with minimal handling in the winery. Reds are fermented with a high percentage of whole berries and are generally pumped over only once a day with irrigators or plungers. The style is distinctly unworked, and all Cullen's wines share an excellent integration of wood with fruit. Finely honed and subtle, they draw you back to the glass.

### The natural solution

While Cullen's wines readily reveal a mastery of the art and science of winemaking, nature has posed some of the winery's biggest challenges. For Cullen, who has a profound respect for nature, it



has also provided the best solutions following the estate's conversion to organics, then biodynamics.

When yields decreased to uneconomic levels (less than 1 tonne/acre) in 1987, owing to the depletion and high acidity of the soils, consultants recommended lime additions. Although yields bounced back by 1989, the recovery was not sustained. At this juncture, Cullen concluded that chemicals were not the solution and opted to trial organic viticulture, letting nature take its course within the quality parameters implemented over the years. The process started in 1998 with advice from consultants. From 2000, Mike Slegers, an experienced

vineyard manager, joined Cullen to oversee the vineyard and pushed through the process to certification in 2003.

By this time, Slegers had attended a biodynamic conference run by the Biodynamic Association of Australia and reckoned it could provide some answers.<sup>2</sup> Trials with one of the Chardonnay blocks in 2003 indicated that rows cultivated biodynamically showed much brighter fruit flavors and enjoyed a cleaner natural yeast fermentation. Convinced that it was the best way forward—both to protect the vines and to remain true to the family's steadfast commitment to quality, integrity, and sustainability—Cullen says "it felt right" to go the extra mile and go biodynamic. Supported by her siblings and shareholders—Rick, Shelley, Stuart, Digby, and Ariane—she says "the great thing about strong personalities is a shared philosophy about what we are doing, and that's the most important thing."

The Cullen vineyard obtained biodynamic certification in 2004. In the same year, fruit was sourced from her sister Ariane's Ellen Ridge vineyard, 5 miles (8 km) south of the estate, for the last time—hence the winery's 25 percent reduction in production (this fruit had formed the core of Cullen's Ellen Bussell range). Cullen explains that she wanted to focus solely on biodynamically grown fruit from the estate and the adjoining Mangan vineyard in Wilyabrup, which could be managed with the same attention to detail and consistency of quality. The Ellen Bussell label will be replaced by wines labeled simply as Margaret River Red and Margaret River White, made from estate- and Mangan-grown fruit that does not make the cut for the flagship wines.

Cullen firmly believes that working the vineyards organically and biodynamically has improved the quality of grapes from vines on sandier, loamier soils, as well as those of the younger Mangan vineyard. They now correlate more closely with those of the best performing gravelly blocks. Overall, the vines are better balanced than previously and in rude health, thanks to biodynamic treatments, composts, and manure, which an independent study suggests have facilitated even deeper root penetration and vastly improved the organic matter of the soil. The winery now makes its own compost using grape marc, manure, and grass seeded with

biodynamic preparations. It recently bought cow horns to make its own “500” horn manure.

As for the wines, Cullen is delighted that grapes are now reaching full flavor ripeness at lower sugar levels. This translates into wines with lower alcohol, better acidity, brighter fruit flavors, and more lifted, floral notes. Moreover, these qualities have been consistent across two extreme vintages: 2006, the coolest and latest on record (picking started on March 12), and 2007, the earliest on record (the last grapes were picked on March 15).

Cullen hopes that the winery will obtain biodynamic certification this year, since, as she puts it, “the wines are now making themselves,” with cleaner wild-yeast fermentations and better acid retention. In 2007, the winery practiced wild-yeast fermentations across the board, with minimal use of nutrients and, for the second year running, relied on natural acidity, even though the vintage was much warmer than 2006. Cullen says she only now really understands how these routine New World additions change the structure of the wine. For the same reason, she is starting to rein back on the use of new oak, in search of the minerality she enjoys in wines she describes as “truly aristocratic, with another dimension”—those from eminent biodynamic or organic estates such as Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Leflaive, Josmeyer, Ostertag, and Zind Humbrecht.

### The bigger picture

Cullen started working at the family winery in 1984 and has been in the driving seat for 18 years. Looking back, her inquiring nature and open-mindedness have been tremendous assets, enabling her to review different approaches to viticulture and winemaking and a wide range of related techniques.

Asked whether the controls and measuring sticks associated with conventional winemaking can limit the possibilities, Cullen replies that they can and that the experience she has accumulated over the years has given her a strong sense of intuition about her vines and wines. She adds: “The great things in life cannot be quantified.” Nonetheless, she is very clear that technology has a role to play, and during her tenure she has invested in a new crusher, press, tanks, and computer-operated temperature control.

She also emphasizes how important it has been to expand the winemaking team, especially after her mother died in 2003, since which time she herself has been more heavily involved in corporate governance. She recalls that it was a big move to take on another winemaker, Trevor Kent, in 1996, even though the previous vintage, the year after her father's death, had been a nightmare to manage, with insufficient hands on deck. Describing Kent as an “unsung hero,” she says his technical skills and innate understanding of the Cullen style have enabled her to step back and supervise the winemaking. She says she has now “found her spot,” by which she means “having an eagle eye” over the wines and the business in general, driving the culture of quality, integrity, and sustainability through initiatives like working organically and biodynamically—not only in the winery, but also at Cullen Dining, the winery's popular restaurant.

Her latest project involves minimizing the impact of the winery's activities on the global environment. Cullen is extremely proud that the winery became Australia's first to offset carbon emissions from its vineyard and winery operations, in September 2006. Through the Men Of The Trees Carbon Neutral Program, Cullen has paid for 1,132 native trees to be planted in the wheatbelt area of Western Australia.<sup>3</sup> These will consume carbon dioxide

and help lower the water table, reducing soil salination. The move is part of an ongoing process to heal the planet and give back what is taken for granted. Cullen is putting her considerable energies into exploring longer-term solutions, including self-sufficiency in power, through the installation of solar panels or wind generators. In the meantime, the winery pays a premium for renewable energy sources from the national grid. Dismissive of global-warming initiatives based on different rootstocks, clones, and varieties (which Cullen dubs “Band-Aids”), she is keen to raise the profile of environmental issues by example and through her involvement in the Margaret River Climate Action Group.

Cullen admits that, as passionate as she is about wine, she would find it difficult to contemplate doing her job—especially the “brand ambassador” role—if it was only about the wines and not the bigger picture as well. One cannot help but think that this is what engenders the high esteem and warm regard in which Cullen, her parents, and the wines are widely held. A great ethos, great wines, great people. ■

*For further information, visit [www.cullenwines.com.au](http://www.cullenwines.com.au)*

### Notes

1. See [www.langtons.com.au](http://www.langtons.com.au)
2. [www.biodynamics.net.au](http://www.biodynamics.net.au)
3. See [www.menofthetrees.com.au](http://www.menofthetrees.com.au)

## TASTING NOTES

The following wines were tasted at the winery in March 2007.

### Cullen Cabernet Merlot

(labeled Diana Madeline from the 2001 vintage)

**2005** Sappy, spicy, youthful nose. Vibrant palate with mocha and licorice-edged plum, blackberry, blackcurrant, cherry, and mulberry. Very European in its finely honed structure: intense, fine, and persistent. Supportive, firm, powdery tannins suggest a long life ahead.

**2004** Seductive cassis nose with violets, cedar, and cherry. Great depth and breadth of flavor, with glossy cassis and baked-cherry notes amply supported by well-integrated oak and rich, ripe tannins.

**2001** Cassis nose with a lick of boot polish. Lovely saturation of fleshy, ripe blackberry and plum fruit, seamlessly wed to sleek, fine-grained tannins. Very complete, with elegant, vinous texture. An understated powerhouse.

**1999** Dark nose with cassis, hints of prune, and earthy boot polish. A lovely seam of well-defined cassis and mulberry fruit, underscored by beautifully textured, ripe tannins. Terrific balance, with a long finish. Excellent.

**1995** Lovely purity of cassis and mulberry, with hints of boot polish on the nose. Excellent balance and structure, with

plush cassis, succulent blackberry, and plum, and supple tannins. Long, persistent finish.

**1994** Gravelly, savory nose, with sharply defined blackcurrant and berry fruits balanced by persistent acidity and firm, tightly knit tannins. Long, intense finish.

**1992** Vibrant, well-structured palate, with a lovely seam of persistent acidity to its spicy, tobacco-edged blackberry/currant and damson fruit. Polished tannins. Superb.

**1989** Lifted cassis and mulberry; lead pencil with a mineral undertow; vinous and persistent. Understated yet intense.

**1988** Developed, slightly bloody nose. A generous palate shows warm earth, cassis, and blackberry framed by supple tannins. Well-balanced, pleasurable wine.

**1982** Still very vibrant, with a tight core of juicy cassis and blueberry, hints of boot polish, and attractive bay leaf wed to a firm backbone of tannin. Imposing.

#### Cullen Chardonnay

**2006** Great purity on the nose and palate. Very Puligny-Montrachet with its biscuit-like charge of citrus, white peach, and lily. Terrific line. Beautiful.

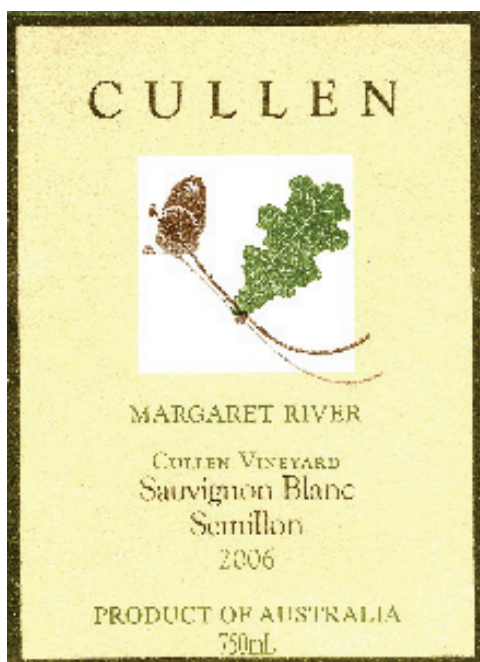
**2005** Sweet floral nose with vanilla bean/white chocolate; smoky oak and vanilla bean on the attack lead into a textured, layered palate of great depth and complexity, with honey and nougat characters to its dried-pear and mouthwatering melon fruit.

**2004** Smoky nose with struck-match notes. Intense palate with citrus, limeflower, and white peach balanced by mouthwatering acidity. Long, lingering finish with nougat, honeysuckle, and a mineral undertow.

**2003** Flamboyant, more tropical style, with dried pineapple and citrus core. Mouthwatering finish. Very flavorsome.

**2002** Leesy, creamy malo nose with lots of vanilla bean. Poised oak informs the structure, as does a lively seam of acidity. Lifted and lively palate, with lemon, grapefruit, and pear. Long and intense.

**1999** Developed, Burgundian style with subtle toast, spice, and honey. Long, persistent finish, with excellent balancing acidity.



**1997** Terrific purity and concentration of white peach, pears, and grapefruit. A real mouthful, with great structure and girth.

**1996** Rich, ripe style, with pears and white peach poached in cinnamon and saffron. Balanced acidity.

#### Cullen Sauvignon Blanc/Semillon

**2006 Mangan** (First made in 2006 with fruit sourced exclusively from the Mangan vineyard) Pungent, thistle/artichoke nose. The palate shows asparagus around a tight, citric core. Persistent, with mouthwatering acidity.

**2006** Broader, more textured palate, with pungent artichoke and delicate lime blossom. Long, focused finish, with a mineral undertow carried by classy, smoky oak.

**2005** Floral nose with lifted lime blossom belies a super-intense palate of terrific concentration and depth. Pronounced mineral, flinty edge to its long, tight finish. Terrific.

**2004** Lemon/lemon-curd nose with smoky oak. Lovely texture, length, and depth of flavor, with a core of lemon/lime fruit and a hint of struck match. Very complete.

**2003** Pungent thistle/artichoke nose with a lanolin, waxy Semillon palate cut with Sauvignon-esque pea pod, enhanced by subtle bath salts.

**2001** Developed petrol/kerosene nose, though the palate shows fresh, spicy coriander seed with a pungent, smoky herbal core. Mouthwatering, mineral finish. Very tight, good.

**1999** Really good depth of flavor, with lovely mouthwatering acidity, warm stones, and bath salts. Very good.

**1998** Lime-cordial/lime-blossom nose in a developed potpourri spectrum. Limpid, mineral, mouth-watering palate.

**1996 Reserve** Graves-like floral, blackcurrant-bud nose, with a distinct whiff of gunflint. Chiseled, mineral palate, with lively, racy acidity and an intense blackcurrant-bud core. Very well balanced, long, and persistent.

