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2023 Margaret River: An exceptional year in a blessed place

The wines of one of the finest recent vintages in the Western Australian region are a win/win for consumers.

By Ken Gargett

Will Berliner listening to Cloudburst. Photography courtesy of Cloudburst

Ken Gargett tastes through the offerings of a dozen Margaret River producers and finds much to celebrate in this standout combination of vintage and region.

The concept of vintage? The idea of each and every vintage of Bordeaux and Burgundy not being heavily scrutinized, and large amounts of money being spent (or not) on the result, is unimaginable. Same for Piedmont, Tuscany, Germany, Rioja, Champagne, and Port (when there is a general declaration). Think also of the impact that vintage has on secondary markets.

Why, then, does the New World see its vintages largely glossed over? Not many years ago, the prevailing view of certain French experts was that the

Ken Gargett

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New World couldn't even claim terroir, so what chance vintage variation? Australia? Well, the place is endless sun, so why expect annual discrepancies. Fortunately, those views are now largely consigned to the dustbin of wine history—yet we still see far less relevance attached to vintages than we should.

If one recent Australian vintage/region combination stands out, it is 2023 in Margaret River—for both reds and whites. Margaret River has enjoyed better conditions year after year, in recent decades, than almost any other region on the planet. Winemakers will always tend to tell you how tough things were, but everything is relative, and a difficult vintage in Margaret River would be a dream almost anywhere else. Push a long-term local, and they'll confess that 2006 was not so great, though they did make some superb whites. The joke is that, if they did ever suffer a poor year, phones would run hot with calls to the Hunter Valley, to find out how to make wine in really tough conditions.

The divinities blessed Margaret River. It may be the most isolated wine region on the planet, but the locale is idyllic, climatically consecrated, and stunningly scenic, whether coast, bush, or farms (and yes, vineyards). The lifestyle appeals, and it sits adjacent to some of the best surfing beaches in a country overloaded with them. (Some of us are less fond of the great white sharks that regularly patrol here, but you can't have everything.) Then throw in superb accommodation, dining, and wines…

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BY WORLD OF FINE WINE

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What makes 2023 so special?

So, why does 2023 stand out among so many exceptional vintages? A range of winemakers offer their thoughts, and we have notes on many of the best wines. (Some featured in the recent Australian Chardonnay piece—see *WFW* 91, pp.126–45—so we didn't double up on those here.)

A colder winter was considered ideal, for Chardonnay especially. There was a delay in budburst, flowering, and verasion for almost a month for the whites, a week for reds. Rainfall was below average but deemed sufficient. Yields and canopy were good. Summer saw an almost total absence of rain but also a lack of heat spikes. Advocates of biodynamics and those blessed with older vineyards were delighted: No disease, and the conditions reduced potential stress. When it came to harvest—February and March here—winemakers could take their time, without any pressure. Those who waited saw mid-April rain, but not to the extent that it caused problems. If there was any divergence between winemakers, those who went early felt they brought in exceptional fruit and that those who waited missed the boat. Those who waited, claimed that doing so resulted in some of the best fruit they had ever seen.

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One drawback was the failure of the local marri tree, loved by local birds, to blossom. So, strict netting of the vineyards was essential, or crops would

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have been devoured. The harvest was estimated at 34,000 tons, 6% above the five-year average.

A red or a white year? Both teams have fierce advocates, so surely a win/win for consumers. A selection of some of the top wines follows, though I have needed to limit it to one wine per producer.

Tasting 2023 Margaret River

Harvesting at Moss Wood in early morning. Photography courtesy of Moss Wood.

Moss Wood

This winery provides more information and clarity on its processes than any other. If you follow the vintage reports of just one winery, make it this one. While Wilyabrup-specific, it can largely be extrapolated across the region.

The most successful wine from this vintage is surely its Cabernet, so focusing on it, the team notes above average rainfall across 2022, providing water reserves for unirrigated vineyards in 2023. "The season settled into relatively moderate conditions. The average growing-season temperature was 19.9°C [67.8°F], slightly below the long-term mean of 20.1°C [68.2°F]. However, the vines accumulated 1,207 hours in the optimal ripening range between 18 and 28°C [64–82°F], comfortably above the minimum 1,100 hours required. At the same time, extreme heat concern was limited, with 48 hours recorded above 33°C [92°F], slightly below the average of 52 hours. Taken together, these conditions provided a steady environment for vine growth and fruit ripening. Ripening proceeded steadily through late summer."

Overly comprehensive? It only scratches the surface. (They provide this for all their vineyards and are equally thorough with the winemaking.)

Which vintages compare? The team at Moss Wood feels that 2023 aligns most closely with its "more classical seasons," including 2014, 2015, and 2018. "When viewed alongside some of our benchmark vintages, 2023 sits between 2001 and 2005. This points to a season where flavour and tannin development proceeded more gradually, without the influence of elevated heat. In practical terms, such conditions tend to produce wines of finer structure and more detailed fruit expression."

2023 Cabernet Sauvignon

Power and finesse—the balance, length, and structure are all world-class. A take-me-now-Lord wine if ever there were one. Is this the best wine Moss Wood has ever made? It must come close. The nose reveals aromas of cassis, mulberries, plums, charcuterie, cigar boxes, and blackberries. The structure is seamless, through to the silkiest of tannins, with great length and persistence and knife-edge balance. Doubt me? Please find a wine from Bordeaux at this price of this quality. Then we'll talk. Thirty years, standing on its head. **| 99**

Cape Mentelle

Famous for bringing the attention of wine lovers to the region when it won consecutive Jimmy Watson trophies in the early 1980s with its Cabernet (a big deal in Australia, especially back then), Cape Mentelle has more experience with Marg River vintages than most producers. The 2023? "Another beautiful Margaret River growing season." For their two southern Chardonnay vineyards, "a mild spring [led] into a dry and calm summer.

Grapevine ripening continued steadily throughout, with harvest commencing mid-February."

2023 Heritage Chardonnay

Serious intensity here. Notes of lemon curd, oyster shell, and peaches; tropical characters, florals, some flint, and a minerally backing. The oak is so well integrated that it is merely one more aspect of this brilliant Chardonnay and part of a seamless overall impression. There is a juicy palate where the flavors simply explode into life. This is complex and concentrated, offering serious length and endless flavors. A wine that will provide enormous pleasure over the next decade. **| 97**

Leeuwin Estate

Famed for its Art Series Chardonnay, there was a time when its Cabernet was seen as perhaps not quite in the same class. Those days are long gone. The team describes 2023 as "another exceptional Margaret River vintage. Following a typically wet and windswept winter in 2022, a prolonged cool and drizzly spring gradually gave way to fine conditions in early November. From that point forward, the season unfolded beautifully, delivering an unbroken stretch of warm, sunny weather through to early April. Excellent fruit-set and even bunch development. Summer was defined by consistency: long, sun-filled days, moderate temperatures between 26 and 32°C [79–90°F], and no heat spikes or summer storms. These stable conditions allowed for slow, steady ripening and the development of beautifully balanced fruit with exceptional purity and intensity." In the end, "the resulting fruit had outstanding ripeness, clarity, and composure, delivering a hallmark Margaret River vintage."

2023 Art Series Chardonnay

Pristine, intense, beautifully balanced, and seamless. The oak has almost been completely absorbed. Immensely enjoyable now, though it will look even better in 12 months. The nose reveals hints of apricot flesh, limes, citrus skins, oatmeal, Madagascan vanilla, gentle touches of grilled cashews, stone fruits, and jasmine. Such intensity but meshed with freshness, energy, and elegance. Powerful but poised; there is incredible length here, with laser-sharp acidity. Complexity is already evident but surely a shadow of what is promised. The intensity never wavers for an instant over the full journey. Stunning stuff—it will still be magnificent in 20 years and still have life ahead. Leeuwin has made some mind-bogglingly good Chardonnays over the years, but none is better than this. **| 99**

Cullen

At Cullen, there is an early nod toward Cabernet as the pick of the vintage, but the KJ Chardonnay is truly scintillating.

According to Vanya Cullen, this was a "low-yielding vintage that resulted in some stunning grapes and hence quality wine. In particular, Cabernet exhibited the best typicity of varietal manifestation. The 52-year-old vines consistently yield well, year in, year out. The growing conditions until December were cold and wet, and due to the negative Indian dipole and La Niña effects finishing in December, we had an unprecedented dry spell until the end of harvest. Delayed budburst, cold southerly breezes blowing off the ocean, and cool mornings and nights all helped retain natural acid in the fruit. At the same time, short periods of peak heat during the day were ideal for slow, even ripening across all grape varieties."

2023 Diana Madeline

Bluntly put, this is perhaps the finest young Australian Cabernet I can recall. Simply brilliant. Concentrated and seamless, with aromas of rich dark chocolate, cocoa beans, plums, beef stock, graphite, mulberries, cloves, and blackberries. Elegance and refinement here—this is all class. Wonderful length, the wine finishing with the silkiest tannins. Immaculate balance and amazing intensity, yet the wine dances with freshness and energy. The longer the time in the glass or decanter, the greater the rewards. Surely one of the greatest Cabernets made in this country, and perhaps Vanya's best ever. **| 99**

Fraser Gallop

Ellin Tritt joined Fraser Gallop in 2017, after gaining experience around the globe. She stepped into the role of chief winemaker after the departure of Clive Otto—big shoes to fill, but the signs are extremely encouraging.

2023 was "a genuinely lovely year across the region, with excellent quality seen in all varieties, particularly Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. One of the great strengths of Margaret River is its consistency, and being surrounded by ocean on three sides provides a remarkable natural regulator for temperature. In 2023, that influence was especially beneficial, with warm, settled days allowing for steady ripening, balanced by cool nights that helped retain natural acidity and freshness. Our first significant rain event did not arrive until Good Friday, aligning with the traditional Easter rains. By that point, all of our fruit had been harvested, leaving us in a very comfortable position from both a quality and disease pressure perspective. Even ripening allowed picking decisions to be guided by flavour development rather than timing pressure, particularly for Chardonnay, where natural acid retention and fruit purity were highlights. Cabernet Sauvignon benefited from extended hang-time, developing depth and structure without excess sugar accumulation. Overall, I would describe 2023 as a vintage of balance and clarity. The wines show confidence without excess, with whites offering tension and line, and reds combining perfume, structure, and longevity."

2023 Palladian Chardonnay

This is a wine of complexity and texture, the aromas weaving through nectarines, florals, citrus, honeydew melon, beeswax, and peach pits. Oak integration is near immaculate and has almost disappeared into the wine, leaving just vestiges of toast. A creamy texture, and the wine is both focused and seamless, with incredible length. The intensity is maintained throughout, and the wine shows marvelous balance. The finish sees the emergence of hints of sour lemon. A cracking wine. Enjoy over the next 15 years. **| 97**

Woodlands

At Woodlands, Andrew Watson found 2023 to be "an incredible year," noting that he "actually preferred the reds. We believe our 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon is up in our top five Cabernets ever produced."

2023 Cabernet Sauvignon Maestro

Powerful and concentrated, yet generous at all times. The nose offers aromas of blackberries, truffles, cassis, soy, tobacco leaves, licorice, dried herbs, smoked meats, graphite, and cocoa powder. The wine has focus, energy, elegance, and concentration throughout, with a persistent finish through to fine, sleek tannins. Good complexity is already emerging, but expect even more over the coming years. A wine of great length, this will handle 20 years without blinking. **| 97**

Pierro

Mike Peterkin at Pierro sees 2023 to 2026 as a series of top years: "2023, 2025, and 2026 are very similar from a temperature point of view, 2023 being the coolest; 2024 was very much warmer and is the outlier." He regards 2023 as "a great vintage for whites and reds" and believes that the wines reflect the vintage perfectly: "gentle climate and gentle wines, elegant and fresh, with lovely natural acidity."

2023 VR Cabernet Sauvignon

The nose gives aromas of blackberries, cassis, sage, tobacco leaves, aniseed, freshly turned soil, and very good oak integration. There is a gorgeous, sweet chocolate palate with immense length and very fine tannins. Finely balanced throughout, this is a cracking Cabernet that will offer pleasure for at least 15 years. **| 97**

Cloudburst

Will Berliner notes that his 2023 Cabernet "emerged from a season that allowed extraordinary clarity and precision in the vineyard. What has become increasingly apparent is that this site speaks most profoundly when approached with restraint—less as something to be shaped, and more as something to be listened to. For me, the 2023 feels less like an interpretation imposed upon the vineyard and more like a continued discovery of its true, unworked expression."

2023 Cabernet Sauvignon

As ever, Will walks to the beat of a different drum, and one could look at this not so much as a great 2023 Margaret River Cabernet but as an absolutely cracking Cloudburst Cabernet. Still young, this is exquisitely fragrant, with an explosive nose of mocha, cigar boxes, root vegetables, cloves, cassis, and sage. There is a ripeness and plushness to the wine, which is balanced and refined throughout, with a lingering finish. Delightfully fresh, through to silky tannins, it should drink wonderfully well over the next quarter-century. **| 98**

Voyager Estate

2023 was Tim Shand's first vintage as chief winemaker at Voyager Estate—some people are born lucky—after experience in the Clare and Yarra valleys, as well as Chianti, Oregon, Bordeaux, and Burgundy, the latter two with Château Margaux and Domaine Dujac.

He notes that after "the volatility and tribulations of 18 Yarra Valley vintages, I thought I'd landed in viticultural paradise. We had plenty of rain in winter, spring was mild but sunny, and the benign weather continued throughout the summer. Temperatures consistently hovered around 25°C [77°F], with breezes in the afternoon then cold nights. One-off days of rain in December and January served to freshen the canopies without any disease pressure. The elongated ripening from these conditions allowed for a prolonged window to pick and the ability to chase depth of fruit and also 'ripeness' of acidity. During the warm years since, when we've picked on fruit/vine condition and felt a bit rushed, the acids have had a hard edge. So, ironically, the milder years actually achieve acid balance (succulence) and arguably have less need for malolactic fermentation."

2023 MJW Chardonnay

Powerful aromatics here, though it is a refined style with real depth, early complexity, and very good intensity. Already showing impressive oak integration, there is focus, energy, and direction here. On the nose, we have notes of lemons, peaches, ginger, and stone fruit. Exquisitely balanced and extremely long, this should provide immense pleasure for at least the next dozen years. | 97

Xanadu

Few people in the region follow the vintages as closely as Glenn Goodall, who has been with Xanadu for more than 25 years and has detailed notes on them all. His thoughts on 2023: "A vintage that I reckon just grew on all of us. (I rate 2019 similarly, albeit cooler.) The 50mm [2in] of rain at Easter in 2023 threw a cat among the pigeons, but Cabernet is resilient, and patience is a virtue. I actually reckon the reasonable yields in 2023 (still moderate by many regions' standards) played a significant role in the quality: 'Less yield is always better' is rubbish in my opinion. (Undercropping and overcropping can both present issues, though the issues are obviously different.) Balanced vineyards is the key to quality, and I feel as though the yields in 2023 were well matched to the season. It will be remembered as an excellent vintage in Margaret River."

2023 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

Some serious depth here, and good complexity is also already evident. The nose reveals aromas of blackberries, smoked meats, aniseed, cloves, dark chocolate, graphite, and bay leaves. This is impeccably balanced, with great length through to fine, satiny tannins. Juicy acidity ensures freshness, and there is good persistence. Enjoy this over the next 10–15 years. **| 97**

Vasse Felix

The annual report from chief winemaker Virginia Willcock and chief viticulturist Bart Moloney confirms that the various Marg River estates enjoyed similar conditions. "A mild season with no extremes, where yields, bunch weights, and balance are a great news story. The growing season began with a cool dry spring. This delayed vine development timing by about two to three weeks, time we used to open canopies, especially to provide maximum sun exposure and warmth for red varieties, which paid off come veraison. When the heat finally arrived in January, it wasn't as severe as 2022. Happily, the consistently dry and warm conditions saw the vines catch up nicely on their development. White veraison was delayed by two to three weeks, while Cabernet timing was approximately one week later than average. Overall, vineyard plots have shown excellent balance with more fruit and canopy, reflecting vine health and minimal heat stress from a milder season. Chardonnays held bright acidity and developed sound flavor and ripeness. Chardonnay yields saw a dramatic increase following the past few vintages, particularly last year. The Chardonnay expression this year is a highlight."

2023 Tom Cullity Cabernet Sauvignon

I think this is the best ever Tom Cullity. The nose exudes serious class. A wine of balance, refinement, elegance, intensity, and finesse. A classic Margaret River Cabernet and—even though it's still early days—clearly one of the best of the vintage. Aromas weave through florals, black cherries, dry herbs, cloves, cassis, tobacco leaves, and blackberries, and the oak is immaculately integrated. With excellent focus, great length, and silky tannins, this should surely provide pleasure for the next 20+ years. | **99**

Howard Park

The 2023 vintage sees the 34th release of Howard Park's flagship Cabernet, named for Jeff Burch's great grandfather, Walter Abercrombie. I'm not sure it has made a better one in all that time. This wine sits comfortably with the very best Cabernets from Margaret River. A wine of balance, exceptional length, impressive structure, and deceptive power, this will be drinking superbly for many years.

2023 Abercrombie Cabernet

An opaque magenta hue, with a purple rim. The use of quality oak and its first-class integration make an immediate impression. The wine exhibits all the power and intensity of the Leston Cabernet, but with extra refinement. On the nose are notes of plums and chocolate, with tobacco leaves, mulberries, graphite, black cherries, smoked meats, and dried herbs. Elegance meets power. This is beautifully balanced and well focused, with the intensity maintained on the very long finish through to the silkiest of tannins. But strip away any artifice here, and it is the gorgeous fruit that carries the day. Enjoy this over the next 15–20 years. | **97**

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