

Great Hunter wines with a dash of McLaren Vale

By **NICK RYAN**

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There's a route between McLaren Vale and the Hunter Valley with ruts and grooves carved out over decades.

Mostly it's been tankers filled to the brim with mutual benefit.

For much of the second half of the 20th century, trucks rumbled across the Hay Plain loaded up with solutions to regional shortcomings.

Rich and ripe shiraz from the south travelled north to put flesh on lighter-framed Hunter bottlings, and tankers went back the other way with medium-bodied wine that could help cut back some of the Vale's more exuberant expressions.

But sometimes the traffic was human as well.

Andrew Thomas grew up in McLaren Vale. His father, Wayne, was a winemaker in the region, celebrated not only for the quality of his own wines but, equally, his capacity to enjoy those made by others.

Andrew obliged fate and went off to Roseworthy Agricultural College to study oenology. History shows that he survived his time at the world's wildest winemaking school but it's a little less clear if the winemaking school survived him.

Rather than simply head back to McLaren Vale and get to work, Thomas ventured north to NSW and landed himself a job with Tyrrell's.

As far as indoctrination into the Hunter Way goes, there was no more powerful conversion tool than making wine in the old cellar lorded over by the late Murray Tyrrell, enlivened by his son

Bruce and alongside the passing parade of gun winemakers who have made the place one of the most important sites in Australian wine.

It didn't take long for Andrew Thomas to go native.

When he decided to go out on his own in 1997, any thoughts of a prodigal return to McLaren Vale were fleeting.

His winemaking had been shaped by Hunter Valley vineyards. He was obsessed with the Hunter's hallmarks, shiraz and semillon, and he knew where he needed to make his mark.

Over the two decades since launching his eponymous label, Thomas's reputation and deep understanding of the regional landscape has meant some tightly held vineyard sites have been unlocked for him and he produces a suite of wines showcasing some of the Hunter Valley's best vineyard sites.

Back in May, Thomas released his 2017 reds, all shiraz. They are universally excellent.

A wine called Synergy is sourced from multiple vineyards to represent a regional Hunter style, and another called Elenay blends a selection of barrels from several vineyards to showcase the interaction between Hunter shiraz and great French oak.

Long-term followers of Thomas's winemaking might surmise it's the outlet for his inherent love of oak now that the impact of barrels has been backed off a bit in the other wines. There's even a wine called Two of a Kind that blends Hunter and McLaren Vale shiraz as a nod to both personal and broader winemaking history.

But the real excitement in these releases comes from lining up the six wines from single vineyards. They share an undeniable Hunter quality but each finds a subtly different way to express it. For lovers of Hunter shiraz they are pure joy.

Kiss Shiraz 2017, \$85

The flagship of the Thomas range from the outset and simply one of the country's great reds. From clay/loam soils on the Pokolbin Estate vineyard, it's a stunning encapsulation of the unique way Hunter shiraz can deliver intensity and depth without resorting to muscular bombast.

Belford Shiraz 2017, \$45

The Belford name refers to an area of the Lower Hunter that has always amused me because it shares its name with the middle names of both broadcaster Alan Jones and AC/DC legend Bon Scott. There's dichotomy at play here, too — plush blue fruits, brambles and dutch licorice, but still with typical Hunter grace and mid-weight finesse.

The Dam Block Shiraz 2017, \$45

Planted adjacent to the block that produces the Kiss, it's a heady swirl of red and blue fruits with a lively suppleness on the palate and fine grained finish.

DJV Shiraz 2017, \$35

An outlier in the line-up, shiraz grown on the deep alluvial sands near Hermitage Road, more commonly considered by locals as semillon country. It's fragrant and high-toned, pippy raspberry fruit and energetic juiciness on the palate. Deliciously different.

Sweetwater Shiraz 2017, \$35

Sourced from red/brown loams over limestone on the Sweetwater Ridge in the Belford area. Lightly reductive, a little hairy and meaty, with underlying dark fruit characters and hits of mocha and earth. Appealingly savoury, beautifully shaped and finely balanced.

The Cote Shiraz, \$35

From the old Cote D'or vineyard in Pokolbin, the wine suggests whoever gave the vineyard that name might have been a bit geographically askew, because the wine actually seems more like a little patch of the Rhone in the Hunter.

Dark, brambly fruit, some spice and bitter herb and an almost granitic texture to the tannins. A steal at this price.