

Dead Cert Serious New Pinot From Gippsland

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While it's too early to gauge whether or not it will join the likes of Bass Phillip and Bannockburn, Moondarra is a tiny specialist pinot noir development that illustrates the extent to which people need to go if they want to really test the qualities of a new site. It will come as little surprise to those who know restaurateur Neil Prentice that he has given his 2ha vineyard near the small Gippsland village of Walhalla every chance of producing world-class pinot noir. And here's how he's done it.

According to Prentice, the vineyard naturally divides itself in two, following the site's topography. Around 40% of the planting is known as the Samba Side, because samba deer used to get into that side of the vineyard when it was young and get stuck into the vines. The rest is called Conception because, its proprietor tells me, this is where his first son was conceived. In these days, when the most meaningless of names are given to wines because Zar Brooks once thought it was a good idea, it's refreshing to stumble across a brand of such singular specificity. The Conception has a north-east aspect, while the Samba Side faces north-west.

Moondarra's vines are planted very close, 70 cm by 1.1 metres. They crop around half a tonne per acre, but in 2001 delivered a surprising one tonne per acre. As you'd expect, they're harvested by hand. The soils are so deep that Prentice once put in a back hoe and was still finding soil and roots at a depth of fifteen feet. He recognises that vigour could be an issue, so the vines are not irrigated. There's a load of quartz and ironstone in the soils, he says, and they're very free draining.

Once in the cellar, which is actually at the Kooyong winery on the Morington Peninsula, Prentice gives his fruit a real workout, although he's entirely satisfied it has the

depth of flavour to handle it. The Conception is made using 70% whole bunches, while the Samba Side is completely made with whole bunches. Each wine experiences an unusually long cold soak for nearly two weeks, before an open fermentation which can get 'scarily' hot, around 37–38 degrees. Prentice treats each fermenter with pigeage three times a day, even during the pre-ferment soak. He's not overly worried about the temperatures he sometimes gets, for the upside, he says, is more complex flavour. 'Sure it bashes the fruit around, but I've got some fiercely intense fruit there', he says.

Then, if they hadn't been through enough, each batch is left on skins for another three to four weeks until the cap sinks. Again, there's more flavour evolution and more adaptation of tannins. There's no point in going shy now, so Prentice then inserts each of the wines into 100% new oak, most of which is made by Reymond from the forest of Tronçais, although Prentice fesses that he 'mucks around' with one other cooper each year and with different toasting levels. He likes to keep the wine in oak to warm up with two Springs, so it remains there for around 20 months before bottling.

Prentice recognises that the wines are quite minty in barrel ('it shows at different times all of the time'), but once in bottle the mintiness diminishes, 'becoming part of the wine'. 'I don't mind when it's on the border of perception', he says. 'I give the fruit more hang time to avoid the mint, but still pick at low Baume relative to the flavour development.' Moondarra's pinots are usually harvested at the end of April and into early May.

In the words of their maker, the Conception is a 'classic silky, sexy, supple, glycerol-slippery pinot', while the Samba Side is 'big and ugly and tough and yum'. The 2001 Conception (17.3, drink 2003–2006+) has a hint of mint and menthol about its aroma of briary and slightly jammy dark cherries and plums, while there's also a whiff of clove, cinnamon and a sniff of funk. A touch of what appears to be oak-derived volatility pokes through, coming across slightly prickly on the palate. Firm and fine-grained, it's deeply fruited and stalky. My only concerns relate to the regional influences and how they will evolve, plus the faint volatility. The 2000 vintage (17.0, drink 2005–2008) is ripe and meaty, richly structured and firmly built around a powerful spine of fine tannins. There's a hint of cooked and shrivelled fruit about this wine, and it's already revealing some complex development. The 1999 Conception (16.4, drink 2004–2007) is a rustic, rather old-fashioned dry red that doesn't speak hugely of pinot noir. It's herbal and meaty, with greenish edges to its rather heavy extract, and lacks the fleshiness of more recent vintages.

I'd score the 2001 Samba Side (16.9, drink 2003–2006+) higher if I was more confident in its ability to shed some of its minty and menthol aromas and evolve into something finer than its rather clunky palate of cloying stewy and under-ripe fruit flavours and aggressive extract presently suggest. But there's an attractive musky perfume and loads of deep, dark fruit, so I'd put on the record right now that I might have under-estimated this wine. What further prompts me to suggest that is the stellar form of the 2000 Samba Side (18.7, drink 2005–2008), whose fragrant, spicy and smoky floral aromas of dark plums, cherries and animal hide present no undue presence of mint. The hot fermentation is reflected by the wine's opulent but slightly cooked fruit expression, but it's long, luxuriant and velvet-like in texture, with many layers of depth and intrigue. Sure it's a little over the top, perhaps what Ian Botham would drink if he discovered pinot noir, but it's a terrific wine.

The 2001 Conception has just been released, while the 2001 Samba Side will become available from early next year. Phone or fax Neil Prentice on 03 9598 3049 if you're interested. The wines cost around \$1000 per case. ■

UNFILTERED

1999

Moondarra

PINOT NOIR
Conception