



THE NEW VINTAGE

A new generation of winemakers has arrived in the Hunter Valley, and they're shaking up the status quo, writes **GEORGIE MEREDITH**.



Rolling hills create
a beautiful backdrop
in the Hunter Valley.



Clockwise from top left: barrels at Vinden Wines; verdant vines in the Hunter Valley; James Becker of M&J Becker Wines. Opposite from left: Richie Harkham of Harkham Wines; and the winery's PopUp restaurant.



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The Hunter Valley is synonymous with tradition. Fabled for its stalwart family brands, its consistently clean and classically-produced drops, and its ability to lure thirsty tourists by the busload, the Hunter’s reputation as the birthplace of fine Australian wine looms large not just domestically, but internationally too.

Dig a little deeper, however, and you’ll find an enthusiastic new generation of winemakers, fuelled by an innate love of the land, with a passion for innovation and an aptitude for creativity. They’re shifting the region’s stereotype, veering away from traditionalism and leaning into a more progressive approach.

While each of these winemakers has differences in style and method, there is one common thread binding them together: the desire to capture the unique spirit of the Hunter in each and every bottle.

Take M&J Becker Wines, for example. The husband-and-wife duo James and Meagan Becker launched their label in 2011, with the aim of producing wines expressive of both season and region through a minimal-intervention approach. For the Hunter, this alone is unusual.

“Our desire is to give people the experience of how Meagan and I fell in love with wine,” says James. “It’s an expression that is sincerely representative of the season, the region, and more importantly the vineyards.”

“And that’s one of the reasons we don’t want to manipulate the wines, so they’re all unfinned, wild ferments with no acid-adds. With some of the wines we use a responsible but minimal amount of preservatives, but we’re trying to be true to what we get.”

Wet weather meant this year was a challenging harvest for many in the Hunter. If it rains too early and for too

long, grapes won’t ripen; it can also affect the time at which grapes are picked, resulting in a diluted flavour in the wine. But producers like the Beckers relish this challenge and the sense of spontaneity it brings to the bottle.

“What we’ve seen in-barrel looks different to previous years, and that’s honestly beautiful to me, that Mother Nature has such an influence in wine,” says James. “I know there were probably a lot of wineries that were looking to polish things so that it looked a little bit more traditional or classic in style. But I don’t want to try to doctor that.”

The Beckers are also going against the grain by experimenting with lesser-known styles, including piquette – a low-alcohol, spritz-like wine made from the second pressings of grape pomace (the skins, pulp, seeds and stems of the fruit). “It’s the most amount of work out of any wine we make,” says James. “It requires a lot of daily attention to detail, like a pet nat. We start bottling it when it’s got a few grams of sugar left; that nice effervescence and those fermentation characters gives the wine a very moreish quality, making it really refreshing and vibrant.”

Following a similar, purposeful approach is Richie Harkham, a spirited young winemaker who’s been pioneering the experimental scene in the Hunter since his first bottle came on the market in 2009. His wines are firmly placed in the “natty” camp, though he prefers to steer clear of that descriptor.

“The one sticking point for me with the natural wine movement is that people hide under that umbrella to make sub-quality wine,” says Harkham. “I won’t release a wine with faults. For us it’s all about quality. Last year I poured 4,500 litres of rosé down the drain because it was smoke-tainted. It was a hard thing for me to do, as we put a lot of love and care into hand-picking all of the grapes. ▶

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We made the wine, we pressed it, we crushed it, we aged it. But if I sold it, people wouldn’t buy wine off me again.”

Harkham’s wines are unfinned, unfiltered and aged in barrel, giving each a longer life with more structure and elegant tertiary flavours. His 2019 Aziza’s rosé, named after his grandmother, is a testament to this; a fruit-forward, full-bodied rosé made from 100 per cent shiraz, with a high level of CO2 that results in a slight fizz and quiet dryness.

Harkham’s 2019 Aziza’s shiraz is also superb. “There’s an elegance; the tannins are so soft,” says Harkham. “We do a really lovely post-ferment maceration where we let it sit on skins for an extra few days, which softens and makes things silkier.”

Like the Beckers, Harkham embraces the obstacles Mother Nature throws at him head-on.

“I love the challenge of making wine. Every year is going to be different, every wine is going to be different. There’s no house style, it all comes down to nature,” says Harkham.

Then there are producers like Angus Vinden, who’s been in the business since he was seven years old, helping out on his family vineyard in Pokolbin.

Vinden, who is a viticulturist first and foremost, still produces the classical wines established by his father in the 1990s under the Vinden brand. But more recently, under the umbrella of two new labels – Headcase and Experimental – he’s been able to play around with smaller, less conventional ideas that showcase the beauty of the region.

“The wines we make are really different from those of other producers in the Hunter Valley,” says Vinden. “Almost all are fermented with wild yeast; we experiment with different vessels such as Spanish clay amphoras and large concrete eggs; we leave things on lees a lot longer to build more texture; we bottle with a small amount of solids and ferment whites on skins, which is taboo in the Hunter Valley.”

Vinden is a perfect example of the fresh, exciting energy that’s now flowing through the Hunter – a new era of winemakers who are pushing boundaries with their practices, and with their followers’ expectations too.

“I love that I’m part of Australia’s oldest wine region, but I definitely don’t want to be held to the idea that everyone here makes semillon and shiraz, and semillon that’s really fined,” he says. “Those wines are amazing, they’re clean and crispy, but it’s not the semillon that I like to drink as much. I’d rather see something fermented on solids and treated a bit more oxidatively so it has more texture and breadth.”

Some of the most radical new drops from the region are the product of third-generation winemaker Usher Tinkler, who’s branched out from the family business to pursue his own style of winemaking. His 2021 Death By Semillon is a preservative-free, skin-contact semillon that’s about as raw and textural as it gets.

“We want to create wines that are non-traditional. You need to be different to stand out from the crowd. So many Hunter wineries are traditional because they’ve been around for so long,” says Tinkler.

That traditionalism is also driven, in part, by rudimentary scoring systems and wine guides such as James Halliday’s Wine Companion, which Tinkler believes disincentsivise producers from exploring too far outside the box.

“I think all it really does is to put everyone in the corner of a big room. So there’s a big movement at the moment to explore the rest of the room, to see what other wine styles are out there and what other things we can do in the Hunter,” he says. “There’s such a huge range when it comes to style. I think traditionally people stick to one little spot.”

The change has been slow and incremental, but the results are now clearly taking shape. Even larger-scale wineries such as Hungerford Hill and Krinklewood are catching on, experimenting with styles traditionally outside of their range. This year, for the first time, Krinklewood has delved into the world of orange wine with a skins-on Gewürztraminer.

No longer can the Hunter be categorised by clean, crisp semillon and fruit-forward shiraz. The changing spirit of the region is now captured in the bottles of these dynamic, young producers.



From top: Angus Vinden of Vinden Wines; grapes are checked on the vine; the vista from Mount View Road, Pokolbin. Opposite: Usher Tinkler of Usher Tinkler Wines.



PHOTOGRAPHY WINE AUSTRALIA (VINDEN & GRAPES) & MILES PRITCHARD (LANDSCAPE).

ONES TO WATCH

Sabi Wabi

Former Krinklewood head winemaker Peta Kotz is stepping out solo with Sabi Wabi. She wants to make wines that are textural and, above all, fun. This year that includes a semillon, which she describes as “pineapple juice for grown-ups”. It’s hand-picked and barrel fermented, resulting in pure and supple flavours. Get in quick – there are only 400 bottles of this one.
sabiwabi.com.au

Dirt Candy

Another husband-and-wife team working with classic Hunter varieties in a strictly non-classical way. Head winemaker Daniel Payne takes a minimal approach in the winery: “Essentially the less I do in terms of manipulating what occurs in the winery [helps to create] a better outcome in the glass.” Try their 2021 The Renegade Traminer – an aromatic blend from two different vineyards, basket-pressed and naturally fermented with wild yeast.
dirtcandy.com.au

James Turpie

Fresh on the scene is James Turpie, one of the Becker’s young protégées. He’s about to launch two labels; James Edward Wines, a more traditional label focusing on the varieties he loves (chardonnay, gewürztraminer, rosé, pinot noir as mainstays); and Maison de Turps, which celebrates fun, funk and imperfection, with the aim to impact the fruit as little as possible throughout the winemaking process.
[instagram.com/jamesedwardwines](https://www.instagram.com/jamesedwardwines)