

TASTING REPORT: KAESLER OLD-VINE SHIRAZ 16 VINTAGE VERTICAL

Contributing Editor Nick Stock

May 29th, 2015

“It’s really twenty years of work, right here on the table,” said Kaesler’s stocky winemaker, Reid Bosward, as he surveyed a 16-vintage vertical of Kaesler Old Vine Shiraz. The tasting was a fascinating one, showing very distinct phases in the evolution of a wine that is a heart-and-soul Barossa red.

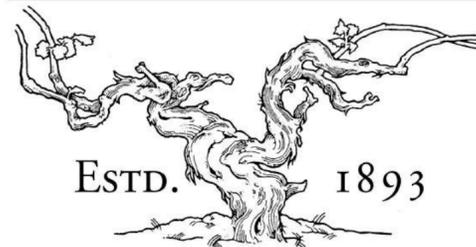


Kaesler vertical line-up

Spanning from the 1996 (the making of which just predates Bosward’s arrival) through to the most recent release of 2012, the tasting tracked a journey of an old vineyard brought back from the brink. Run with plenty of irrigation from a salt-riddled supply of bore water (delivering a staggering 2.3 tonnes of salt per hectare) to produce higher crops rather than higher quality, the irrigation was wound back and the yields reduced over time.

“It initially worked against us,” mused Bosward, “as the salt was consolidated in the soil as we pushed it down with rain water. We had to stop and think if we were actually making the right move.” Irrigation was completely rethought, pruning was changed from spur pruning to cane pruning at the end of the 2000 season, the crops were halved and organic matter was applied – all a central part of a drive towards increased health of this clay-based soil.

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The plan prevailed to deliver the desired result around 2004 to 2005, and the fifty-plus year-old vineyard (planted in 1961 and 1965 with cuttings from their 1893 plantings) rebounded to health, balance and vitality. The balance of maturity in the vineyard was found, with acidity, sugar and tannin all aligning at the right levels around harvest time.

The winemaking also took a few steps to refinement – consisting of nothing revolutionary, but more a fine-tuning of oak selection, maturation times and looking after what Bosward calls “the one-percenters.”

He is the sort of bloke who fuses strength with humility and, of all the wines he makes at Kaesler, this is the wine that most reflects this attitude. “We make the big wines that really push the ripeness envelope – big, bruising reds like The Bogan and Old Bastard, but this is a wine built around a balance that is struck in the vineyard and then guided through to bottle.”

To this end, Bosward spoke of a philosophy he observed in Bordeaux when working for Jacques Lurton that saw the vineyard manager incorporated into key discussions, tastings and decisions – decisions that are usually the exclusive domain of winemakers. “The idea that a winemaker waltzes into the vineyard for the last few days of a year long journey and calls the shots just seems ludicrous when you think about it,” he said.

It was the right move to take this management style to Kaesler where vineyard manager Nigel van der Zande is integrated into the winemaking decisions, especially where valuable old-vine vineyards are at stake. The evidence of its success was on display to prove it.

The other gripping aspect of the tasting was the way in which this vineyard closely tracked and recorded the character of each vintage, swinging gently with the mood of the season and producing wines that really tap deep into the mood of this mighty Barossa Valley terroir and its annual cycle.

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The best wines on the table were simply the product of a superior vintage, which is a good sign when seen with consistency, and there were many greater wines made in lesser years like the 2000 vintage. My picks were the 2006 for the boldness with freshness; the 2004 for sheer balance and completeness; the 2010, which delivered focus and refined muscular strength; the 2009, which has fresher, early-picked vivaciousness; and the 2002, an atypical cool vintage wine with brightness and finesse.

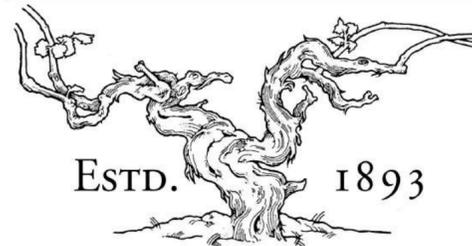
One of the other highlights of the tasting was the oldest wine on offer, the 1996. It was a strong start and a reassuring one, as that the first glass holding the oldest wine from an era of questionable vineyard management seemed to have endured with composure and balance. It gave more than a hint of the ultimate value of this old-vine vineyard nestled in the heart of the Nuriootpa district of this great Australian terroir.



Kaesler winemaker Reid Bosward and Nick Stock

Contributing Editor Nick Stock is a renowned Australian wine writer, author, presenter and filmmaker who reports on his worldwide wine tasting experiences for JamesSuckling.com.

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2012

A strong, meaty thread to the nose with a rustic edge: it's ripe and plummy with red fruits and lighter tarry, earthy notes. The palate has a succulent, red fruit palate and is juicy and even, while sheets of fresh tannins and berry pip flavors come through on the finish. This will evolve into a very meaty, leathery style. Drink in 2020.

93 points

2010

A "hands off" vintage that has a composed, tarry and brambly red fruit nose that delivers an almost chalky and slightly peppery, flinty edge as well as a core of plums and a dark fruits. The palate has essence-like depth, energy and concentration; it shows a very assertive core of tannins, some dark chocolate, dark plums and very supple, sturdy tannins that carry blackberry and blue plum flavors deep and long. Powerful and smooth. Drink in 2018.

95 points



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2009

An earlier picking date here. This has a bright, lighter red to blue fruit nose with a floral edge too, some pomegranate and blood oranges, and is bright and fresh. The palate has super fine tannins that make this supple and even, really fanning out finely through red plum fruit flavors and a handy sense of balance, depth and drive. Contained and compact plum finish. Drink now.

94 points

2008

Two weeks above 40°C during this particular vintage. This was all about picking and has big, bold, dark-hearted fruit as well as a plum liqueur, dates, redder fruited aromas, maraschino cherries and nougat spices. The palate has deep chocolate-coated plum flavors and is dark, almost reminiscent of rum, tarry and featuring big, supple, flowing tannins. Drink now.

93 points

2007

A very dry winter, drought-ridden year with low yields here. The wine has an intriguing nose, smelling like an old mechanic's garage and also has a wealth of darkly fruited plums and blackberries. The palate's silky, supple, even and really dense; the tannins are strong and deep but sit very even, carrying a wealth of dark plum and blackberry flavors; and this is super concentrated, ending with a mocha finish. Drink now.

93 points

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2006

Good fragrances of fresh leather, baking spices and nougat, along with a more reticent, redder streak of fruit. The palate has a very smooth, supple and juicy thread. There are smooth and centered redder fruits, while the acidity leads brightly polished tannins long and balanced. Plenty of time ahead. This is upbeat and deep. Drink now.

95 points

2005

Intense, fresh and gently fragrant, this has red-cherry, plum and blackberry fruit on offer with a bright, tarry and slightly peppery edge. The palate has a core of redder fruit flavors, while the acidity surges along. The sweet spices wrap around dark plum liqueur, chocolate and blackberry flavors and tannins that build to finish very well indeed. Very ripe and very good. Drink now.

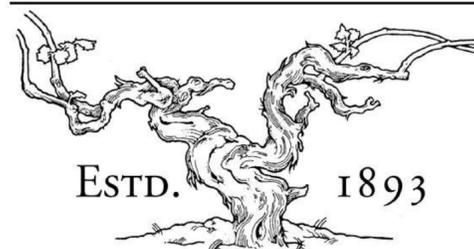
92 points

2004

A beautifully complex nose here that has a wealth of dark plums, blackberries and spices on offer as well as blue fruits that make this really fresh. The oak is also nicely matched. The palate has a superbly silky texture, spice-wrapped dark plum and blackberry fruit flavors in abundance and very supple tannins. All in all, it's slippery and even. Mocha finish. So complete. Drink now.

94 points

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2003

An early vintage with a lot of rain just before harvest, and the nose has less exuberant fruit, smelling of black tea, tar and very dark berry fruits. The palate has bold tannins and is really saturated, powdery, fine but dense. Although it's softened over time, it's still all about the dark plum fruits and tannins. Drink now.

92 points

2002

A super cool year with a very fresh, more fragrant nose and a hint of plum liqueur as well as maraschino cherries and pomegranate seeds. The palate has punchy acidity and is very silky yet strong and assertive. Look for the blue fruits and plums as well as the tannins that are fine and long. This has a little more time ahead, being an atypical vintage and showing finer detail. Drink now.

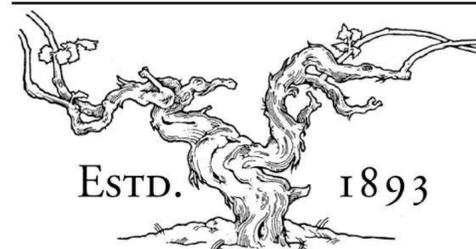
94 points

2001

This was a year when global warming first showed, providing some really sustained heat. There's real power and depth here, coupled with a brambly red- and black-fruited nose. This shows a smooth spread of finer tannins, a softer and more dense palate, yet it's also still very fresh. Bold, fine tannins. Drink now.

93 points

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2000

A very low-yielding year with just 280kg per acre, this has a very distinctive black-fruited nose and is tarry as well, speaking strongly of the Barossa Valley with a little spice and pepper edge, too. The palate has real density, depth and plush – not to mention smooth, beautifully stored tannins; very rich plum and blackberry flavors here; and an attractive spicy finish. One of the best wines from the 2000 Barossa vintage. Drink now.

93 points

1999

Very savory and meaty, this shows fairly strident Brettanomyces. It's strongly tarry, too, and the power of the fruit is evident with really concentrated dark fruits, blackberries and plums, not to mention the grainy finish. Drink now..

90 points

1998

A perfect year. This is very tarry and there's a dark-fruited nose along with some citrus zest. It's very ripe and gently tarry but with a bold, chewy tannin core; it's assertive and still lively, leading to a creamy, spiced nougat finish. Drink now.

93 points

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1997

This shows a more mature state of development with mellow red plum fruits and smooth, fine and easy tannins. Quite earthy and spicy, slightly salty palate enveloped by crunchy tannins. Drink now.

91 points

1996

Shows polished cedar, dried blackberries, tar and some creamy spices, as well as dried red plums, honey and leather notes. This is mature with life. The palate has a very smooth, sturdy, focused and polished shape to it. The acidity is bright, while the purity of red plum and blackberry flavors are remarkable. This is very soft and supple, and it all culminates in a sweetly spiced finish. Drink now.

93 points

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