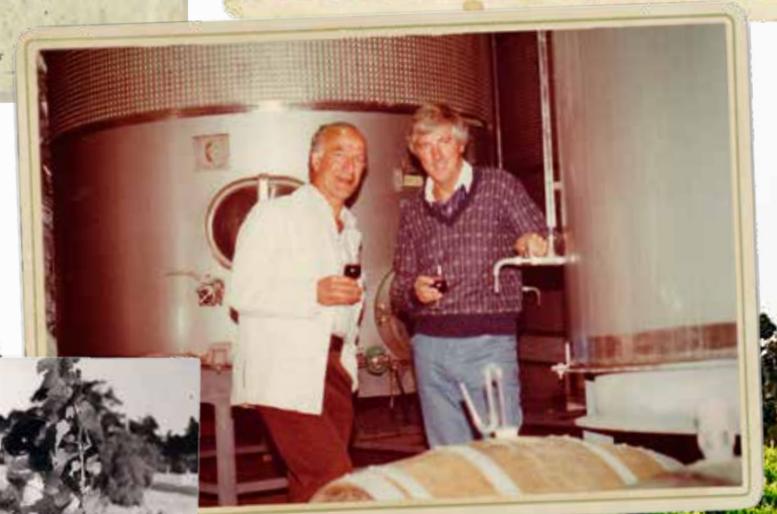
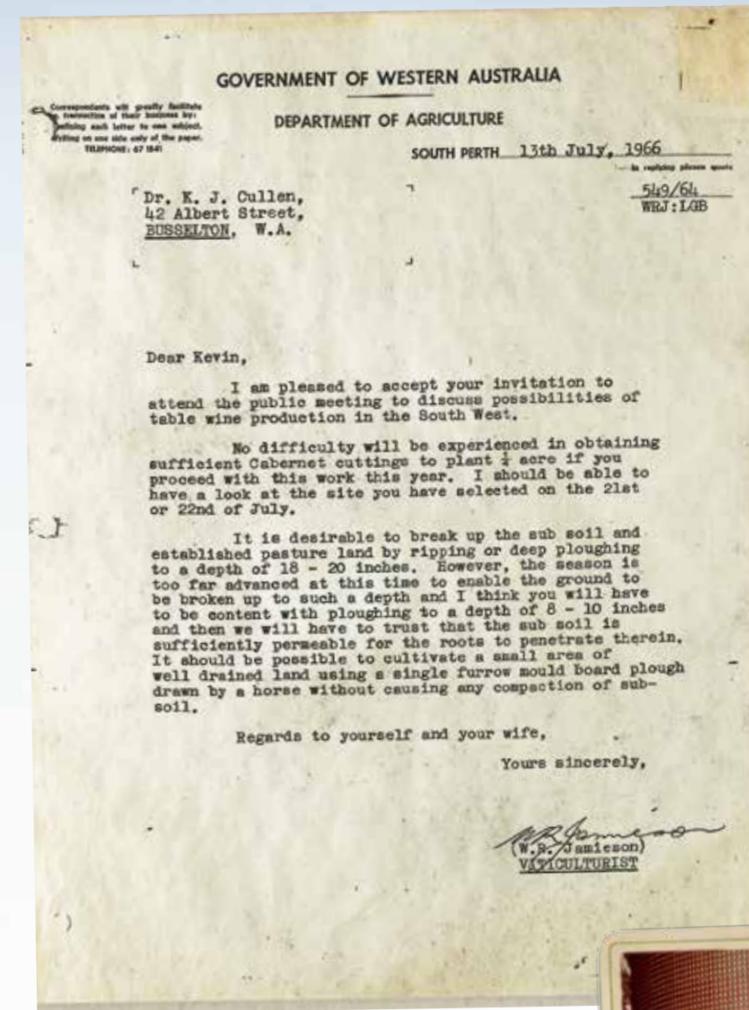
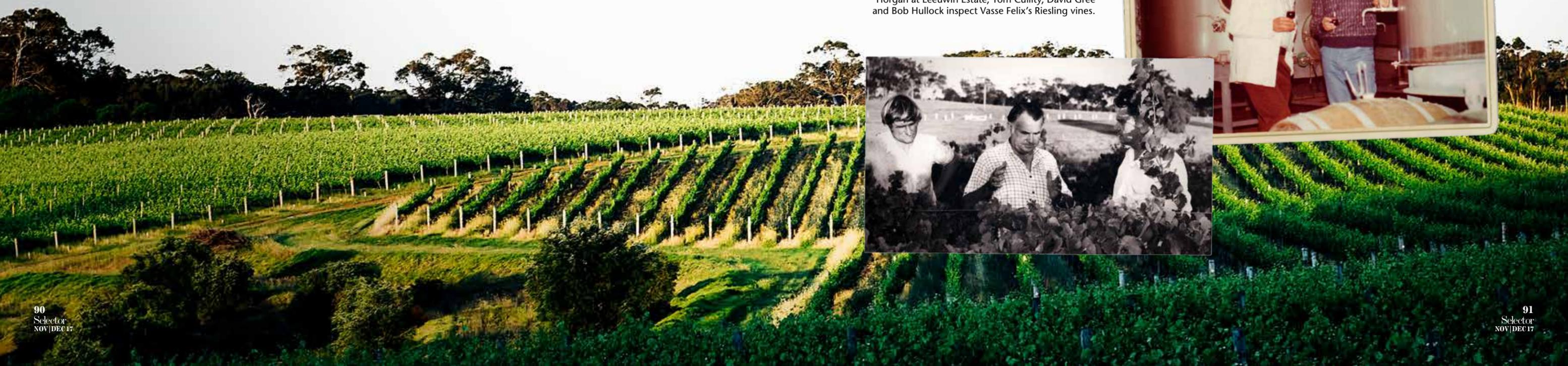


# Margaret River's 50th

AS WA'S MARGARET RIVER WINE REGION CELEBRATES ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY, WE CELEBRATE THE PIONEERS WHO BROUGHT IT ALL TO FRUITION.  
 Words **Danielle Costley**



Clockwise from above: Viticulturist W.R. Jamieson accepts Dr Cullity's invitation to discuss the potential for table wines in the South West; Tom Cullity and Jack Mann at Vasse Felix; Robert Mondavi and Denis Horgan at Leeuwin Estate; Tom Cullity, David Gree and Bob Hullock inspect Vasse Felix's Riesling vines.



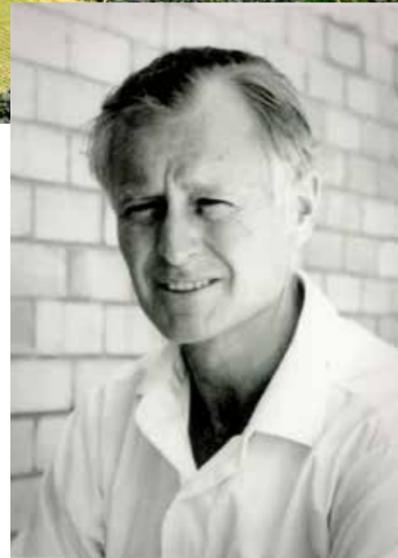


A hundred years ago, a couple of Italian immigrants arrived in the south west corner of Western Australia with some cuttings of a little-known grape variety called Fragola. These vines produced the first wines to be sold in Margaret River for the hefty price tag of two shillings a flagon. Fondly dubbed 'red dynamite' by the enthusiastic community, this wine was in high demand at the local dance halls where it was sold from the back of a truck. And it was said to pack quite a punch.

Times have certainly changed since then and while other growers produced small batches of wines in the ensuing years, it wasn't until the mid 1960s when agronomist Dr John Gladstones published a report identifying Margaret River's vast potential for viticulture, that the region, as we know it today, was born.

The Gladstones report attracted the attention of budding vigneron and medical practitioners, Thomas Cullity and Kevin and Diana Cullen. In mid 1966, the Cullens organised a meeting in the Margaret River township of Busselton inviting Dr Gladstones to speak. It was the final push those attending needed.

Soon after, the Cullens, in partnership with Tom Cullity, and Geoff and Sue Juniper, planted vines in Wilyabrup,



**Above:** Cullen Wines co-founder, Dr Kevin Cullen. **Left:** Vanya Cullen, winemaker at Cullen Wines. **Top:** An aerial view of Margaret River.

which unfortunately didn't survive. It was left to Cullity, who in 1967 purchased a mere eight acres of land, to plant Margaret River's first commercial vines – Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Malbec and Riesling.

He named his venture after French sailor, Thomas Vasse, who had drowned in Geographe Bay. Hoping for better fortunes than the Frenchman, he added the Latin word for happiness – Felix. His first crop, too, was all but a disaster, decimated by birds and succumbing to bunch rot. Undeterred, but determined, Cullity persevered. In 1972, Vasse Felix won a gold medal at the Perth Show for its Riesling. The following year, gold for its Cabernet. Happy days, indeed.

The Cullens also persevered. In 1971 they planted vines on their own land where their current vineyard still thrives. At this stage, Moss Wood had been established for two years and within another two years, Cape Mentelle, Leeuwin Estate,

and Woodlands had also been established. In what was a fledgling industry at the time, these founding wineries worked tirelessly to forge the region's reputation as a premium wine producer.

"I pay tribute to the winemakers and grape growers of Margaret River," says Dr Gladstones, who is still a proud member of the Margaret River community today.

"It's one thing to have an idea and put it forward, it's another this to be brought to fruition. The work and financial commitment that had to go into it has been a big factor in bringing Margaret River to its present world-class status."

#### AN AMERICAN INFLUENCE

While the pioneering wineries may have simply dreamed of making good wine, there was a certain Californian who knew



**Left:** Diana Cullen, Cullen Wines co-founder. **Above:** Three generations of Credaros in their Woolston vineyard. **Above right:** Leeuwin Estate senior winemaker Tim Lovett and winemaker Phil Hutchison.



of Margaret River's enormous potential – Napa Valley wine baron, Robert Mondavi. As the story goes, Mondavi was searching the globe for the next great wine region. His search took him to Margaret River and a patch of land owned by Denis Horgan, a chartered accountant, and his wife Tricia. Today, it is Leeuwin Estate.

"Mondavi arrived on our doorstep wanting to buy the place," says Denis. "We weren't the selling type, so he became our mentor in setting up a winery. He and his son and winemaker, Tim, came out on numerous occasions to advise on what varieties we should plant, where to plant them, about oak treatment and so on."

Mondavi's advice was also greatly accepted by Cullity and Kevin Cullen, who Denis befriended and met up with regularly to discuss all things wine.

"You would have sworn you were in a dog fight," Denis says of the trio's rendezvous. "They used to swear and curse and talk about one another's wines, and then we'd all sit down and have lunch like we were the greatest of friends."

"They were fabulous guys. It was the best education I could have had because they didn't pull any punches. They set out to make wines that ranked with the best in the world, and they damn well did it."

#### A REGION EVOLVED

Fifty years on, Margaret River is indeed a world class wine region. While it only produces three percent of Australia's wine, it contributes 20 per cent of our premium

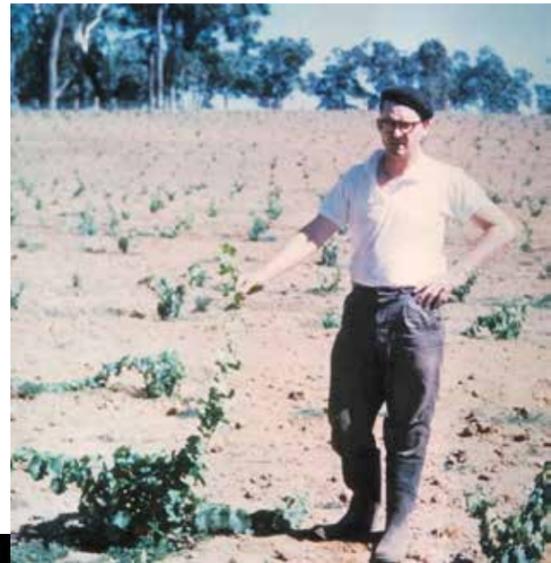
wine production. It is recognised internationally for exceptional Cabernets and Chardonnays, and also produces a stylish signature blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon.

The handful of wineries have now boomed to over 200 with most of them producing the flagships, while also experimenting with other varietals and blends that suit the Mediterranean climate, cooling sea breezes and rich gravelly soils.

In the northern districts lies the family-owned Credaro Wines, where some of the region's first vines were planted by the pioneering Meleri and Credaro families to produce the 'red dynamite'. These days, they have over 140 hectares of vines



MARGARET RIVER



FOOD + WINE

**Clockwise from above:** Margaret River; Dr Tom Cullity with the first vines; the bells at Lenton Brae; Lenton Brae winemaker, Edward Tomlinson; Vasse Felix restaurant.



**Clockwise from left:** Dr Peter Thompson, Bob Cartwright and Paul Dixon at Thompson Estate; Vanya and Diana Cullen; Vasse Felix Estate; Hay Shed Hill; Vasse Felix Barrel Hall.



spread across five vineyards and alongside the legendary Fragola, and Chardonnay, Cabernet and SBS, they are doing well with Pinot Grigio, Shiraz and Merlot.

Thompson Estate is renowned for its Chardonnays and Cabernets, but is also finding favour with its Cabernet Merlot, Malbec and famed Four Chambers Shiraz. The 20-year-old vines are organically grown and produce impressive wines under the watchful eye of Bob Cartwright of Leeuwin Estate acclaim.

At Hay Shed Hill, whose vineyards were first planted in the 1970s, the Block 6 Chardonnay is the star. Dry grown and

located on a steep south facing slope, it is lean, light and fresh, but also has “flavour, aroma, body and textural interest,” says winemaker and owner, Michael Kerrigan. In concert with the Block 6, he is also giving plenty of attention to a stunning Cabernet Franc, as well as an intoxicating Shiraz Tempranillo blend.

In the cooler, southern parts of the Margaret River, Sauvignon Blanc really finds voice as a single varietal. In close proximity to the Indian Ocean, you will find Redgate Wines, a winery that takes its name from a nearby property that once had a prominent red gate and was known for the production of a rather powerful moonshine. This estate, established by the Ullinger family in 1977, produces a sublime Sauvignon Blanc that is layered with gooseberry and lime. Their Cabernet blends are also beguiling, and they have a Chenin Blanc that is also turning heads.

Even further south lies Hamelin Bay Wines, a quaint winery with a simply breathtaking outlook. It produces one of the region’s finest Sauvignon Blancs

– fresh, vibrant and tropical, while their Rampant Red, a blend of Shiraz, Merlot and Cabernet, is winning fans.

**SOMETHING TOTALLY NEW**

When Moss Wood winery was sub-divided in 1982, architect Bruce Tomlinson purchased the land and established Lenton Brae winery. Putting his talents to use, he built a striking rammed earth winery and cellar door with two towers that are home to quintet bells from Westminster and chime on the quarter-hour.

A few years ago, the Tomlinsons introduced a new varietal to the region, Pinot Blanc. This unassuming grape is a mutation of Pinot Noir, yet genetically similar to Chardonnay.

Winemaker, Edward Tomlinson, says he was drawn to the subtle charm of this early ripening variety.

“Essentially, it is a Sauvignon Blanc for grown-ups,” he says. “The decision to plant Pinot Blanc was a big call. Having seen my father wrestle with the implications of uprooting two hectares of Pinot Noir in the early days, I was amazed at how supportive he was for me to take a punt on Pinot Blanc.”

And these are not the only newcomers to the region. There’s been an influx of plantings of Mediterranean varietals in recent years, with Fiano, Vermentino, Nebbiolo and Sangiovese finding favour amongst the growing band of winemakers.

**A FITTING HALF CENTURY**

As the 50th celebrations kick off in earnest, it is heartwarming to see much love given to the traditions of the pioneers.

Vasse Felix’s ‘tractor bucket’ party recreated the spirit of founding producers

who celebrated each of those crucial early vintages in style with tractor buckets turned into eskys, filled with ice and wine and enjoyed out amongst the vines, even serving as a bed on some occasions.

“Anniversaries such as this are an opportunity to share with the world just how special Margaret River is. It is a wine paradise,” says current Vasse Felix owner, Paul Holmes a Court.

The single remaining bottle of the 1972 Cabernet Sauvignon Malbec is on display in the Vasse Felix vault and to celebrate the winery’s 50th anniversary, they have released a Tom Cullity Cabernet Sauvignon Malbec made from those original vines. I am sure the good doctor would approve. And while he would be astounded to see how big the region has grown, he always knew how good the wines were going to be.

“I knew because Mondavi told me so,” says Denis Horgan. “He always said that Margaret River was going to make wines that ranked with the best in the world. It was his catch cry.”

The best is still yet to come says Dr Gladstones, who fittingly gets to have the last word.

“I strongly believe that we’ve only seen the beginning,” he says. “This region has tremendous natural advantages for grape growing to produce top quality wines.

“With its environments, experience and now increasing vine age, Margaret River is undoubtedly ripe to walk with the greatest.”