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Flirting with Perfection - Giaconda Chardonnay 2011-2021

BY ANGUS HUGHSON | JANUARY 23, 2024

Blink, and you will miss Beechworth, a small yet grand inland Victorian town with a history of gold and bushrangers. The wide main street, with its 19th-century architecture, has an almost Wild West feel, coming as a welcome surprise as you drive through the broad, empty plains and mountain landscapes of northeastern Victoria. It is easy to imagine the region's vibrant history—the streets full of horses and gold prospectors searching for their fortune during the second half of the 1800s. But today, this town prospers on new seams of gold as ground zero for revolutionary Australian Chardonnay. At its epicenter is Giaconda.



Granite boulders were unearthed on the Giaconda Estate in preparation for new plantings.

Beechworth and the surrounding vineyards are a blip in the national crush, totaling a

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tertility and a complex mix of granite and sandstone soils.

There is a distinctive intensity to the mid-summer heat in Beechworth—the sun here is powerful and searing. But its proximity to Alpine influences, with cooling winds and gentle elevation, also provides significant protection to carefully chosen sites. It all adds up to impressive diurnal variation, so much so that Beechworth is Australia's most continental wine region, even driving some growers to flirt with Nebbiolo. The cycling from warm summer days to cool nights is at the heart of the Beechworth wine style, yielding Chardonnays that marry raw power with surprising detail and subtlety.

There is little doubt that the soils also play an important part in the regional style. Hard and mean on the whole, volcanic granites dominate to the north, in the form of a rocky base that helps to craft flavorsome wines. Here, massive granite boulders pepper the landscape, and the use of heavy earth-movers is often the only solution. Thankfully, there is also decent water-holding capacity, as the granites have degraded over time into clay loams. To the south of the region is a combination of more gravels and sandstones, with outcrops of siltstone, quartz, silica and shale, which help to build more structural wines.

It is a testing environment, so much so that early grape growers abandoned their plots. Only the hardiest vines can tolerate such demanding conditions. Beechworth is a place where only the strong survive and few succeed, but that was exactly what drew the eye of ex-mechanical engineer and budding winemaker Rick Kinzbrunner.

I remember my first meeting with Rick Kinzbrunner almost 20 years ago when Giaconda was already firmly on the fine wine radar. It was a nerve-wracking experience as Kinzbrunner sat back in a rocking chair, surveying his prey. This is not a man who's one for small talk. He brings a searing intellect to the table, coupled with a take-no-prisoners approach to the pursuit of quality. He does not say much, but each word and action is carefully considered, an ethos that carries through into the vineyard and cellar.

For an Australian winemaker in the late 1970s, Kinzbrunner had a Rolls-Royce wine education. His first foray into wine was in New Zealand. "Chardonnay in Australia fascinated me, so I made a little at home during my time in Hawke's Bay. After that, there was no way back, and life was wine, wine, wine." But it was in California that Kinzbrunner found mentors and inspiration. "I had heard that Stag's Leap was the place to be, so I went there looking for work. This was all before the Judgement of

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Cellars and soaked up everything he could from the local wine scene while simultaneously studying a couple of subjects at UC Davis on the side. It was a time when the orthodoxy was being challenged with experimentation and new ideas. Winemakers were making Chardonnays that borrowed from some Burgundian techniques but also retained their own unique slant. Kinzbrunner worked and swapped ideas with a cohort of talented winemakers, many of whom went on to great things, including David Ramey, John Kongsgaard, John Williams and Dick Ward, who all became, and largely remain, good friends.



The Giaconda Cellar was excavated by local miners using two and a half tons of dynamite.

“My time in California really set the groundwork for Giaconda.” He also had experience with the Moueix family at Château Magdelaine and Château Petrus, but the California years were by far the most impactful.

The subsequent founding of Giaconda in Beechworth, Victoria soon after was not part of some grand scheme; it was more the result of serendipity on a number of fronts. Kinzbrunner had an old mentor with a vineyard in King Valley in northern Victoria, which he returned to Australia to manage. But grape growing was not Kinzbrunner’s

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the local terroir might be right for premium wine production.

Now, Kinzbrunner's experience in California would rise up through a desire to make outstanding Chardonnay. Beechworth's exposed hillsides and hard country had scared off many potential suitors in the past, including Kinzbrunner's own employer, Brown Brothers, who had recently abandoned a site for its lack of economic viability. But his education among some of California's elite, with a serious fine wine focus, provided a different outlook than many Australian winemakers of the time, precious few of whom were really shooting for the stars like their compatriots across the Pacific Ocean. Kinzbrunner zigged while others zagged, which has been a constant theme. After taking on the role at Brown Brothers, it did not take Kinzbrunner long to find his own piece of dirt. He didn't spend years studying the terroir looking for the best site—again, serendipity played its role. "It was an accident, really; I knew nothing. One day, I was driving to Beechworth, and a piece of land with a house was for sale." He purchased the first ten acres in 1981, with 40 adjoining acres added soon after. The California experience clearly loomed large; in 1982, Kinzbrunner planted the land with 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Chardonnay. Both varieties grew well, but over time, it became clear that not only was Chardonnay more successful on the site, but it would also be easier to sell. Kinzbrunner had a very strong connection to the variety. "I followed it around, and it followed me around."

The harsh local landscape has its advantages, not only for wine quality. The rolling, bony hills never attracted intensive agriculture, and before Giaconda, the estate was used only for occasional livestock grazing. This saved the site and much of the region from agrochemicals—herd manure was the only historical, albeit occasional, input. The property had essentially remained the same for around 400 million years. This suited Kinzbrunner's general mindset in terms of sustainability, well before it became fashionable, with the property organically certified since 2018. While there have been flirtations with biodynamics, for the moment, there are no plans to go down that path.

Some of the land had been cleared for grazing—that was where Kinzbrunner planted his vines. Much of the Giaconda property was initially unsuitable for vineyards, thanks to the many boulders on or near the surface and a lack of the significant funds required to clear them. It is only in very recent times that more of the land has been cleared for new plantings.

In viticulture, Kinzbrunner went against the grain. While northern slopes were generally the prized sites in the Southern Hemisphere, thanks to their advantageous sun

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Kinzbrunner's site selection, whether intentional at some subliminal level or just plain good luck, helped to minimize the effect of the heat on his vineyards and fruit. The site is largely surrounded by untouched forests and national parks, promoting biodiversity, although high fencing is necessary for protection from local pests—primarily kangaroos.

The Chardonnay vineyard was initially planted with the P58 clone, imported by Penfolds in 1958 and said to have been sourced from Le Montrachet. Across Australia, it has proved to be very successful. Kinzbrunner later planted some of the Dijon clones, but over time, they were deemed less well-suited to the Giaconda site and uprooted, although a small plot of clone 95 will be replanted this year. While P58 makes up much of the vineyard, there is also a small amount of Mendoza used for the Giaconda Estate Chardonnay.

Over time, other varieties were added to the Estate, with fruit also sourced from a small number of local vineyards for other Giaconda labels, including Pinot Noir, Shiraz, Roussanne and Nebbiolo. Today, Giaconda has pulled away from buying fruit from non-estate vineyards, preferring to have complete control over his wines. All are grown on the original estate, with the exception of Nebbiolo, which is reared at a significant elevation on their other Red Hill site overlooking Beechworth. There has also been significant recent groundwork on the original estate to remove boulders from the soil for new plantings in 2023 and 2024, totaling close to one hectare. This will see all the suitable land on the estate planted, with the fruit from these new vineyards hopefully destined for the Giaconda Estate Chardonnay in the next 15 years.

In addition to varieties, planting densities have also been regularly evaluated. Giaconda had significant plantings at relatively high density, but felt over time that they did not perform in the hard local soils, putting too much stress on the vines. To remedy that, in some vineyards, every second row was pulled out about eight years ago. The quality has never looked back.

For Chardonnay, Kinzbrunner eschews more modern techniques found in many Australian Chardonnays, preferring a distinctly Burgundian angle. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." For example, the Giaconda Estate Chardonnay is one of the few local Chardonnays to be basket pressed, before an overnight settle, a long barrel fermentation and maturation in oak. The small basket press size does require an extended timeframe for picking, which brings some risk, but the quality advantages are significant.



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Fruit is also crushed, neither hard nor gentle, prior to pressing, which Kinzbrunner firmly believes adds character to the wine and potentially enhances minerality. That less protective handling can make the Giaconda Estate Chardonnay a little shy, to begin with, but Kinzbrunner is far from concerned, as these are wines deliberately built to age and age well. Giaconda continues to refine its house style, in part as a reaction to global warming, bringing oak maturation down from 20 to 12 months, 30% of which takes place in new oak. There is then an extended settling in tank prior to bottling, so, ideally, the wines do not require any fining and are never filtered. Oak choice is another feature of the Giaconda style under constant review. The Kinzbrunners have a unique and close relationship with the Sirugue French oak cooperage in Nuits-Saint-Georges as the sole importer for Australia and New Zealand. As such, Kinzbrunner works closely with the cooperage to create barrels that suit Australian wine and conditions. Giaconda uses a mixture of Tronçais and Vosges wood, with a range of toasts after three years of air-drying.

The maturation of these wines is also unique in a local context, taking place in a granite-walled cellar that Kinzbrunner designed himself, built with the assistance of 2.5 tons of dynamite. It illustrates that no effort or expense is spared in pursuing quality. The cellar was designed with an eye on the advantages of the humid, climate-controlled caves and cellars seen in many great international estates. Deep in the granite hill, temperatures rarely deviate from 16-17 degrees Celsius, with humidity over 90%. There is a rare energy to the wines from Giaconda, and I cannot help but think this cellar is an important part of the process. On what is a dry continent, the cellar's mix of constant low temperatures and high humidity (conditions that keep barrels tighter, requiring less topping) keeps the resulting wines fresher and helps to retain all the characteristics of the soil and terroir. The resulting slow alcoholic and malolactic

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in 2007. Local viticulturist Casey White now assists them. While Rick Kinzbrunner retains full control over key decisions, much of the day-to-day running of Giaconda is now in the hands of a new generation. “I intend to keep working and keep control, but take some time for pleasure, and potentially, we have a good succession plan.”

What was clear from the recent vertical tasting is that Giaconda has lost none of its style over the last 12 years. In fact, it has seen a refinement of style, and the wine has truly elevated to be among the world’s greatest for the variety. Today production is 12,000 bottle per year, of which 25% are exported.

All the wines were tasted at the winery in November 2023.

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