

Terrific Torbreck

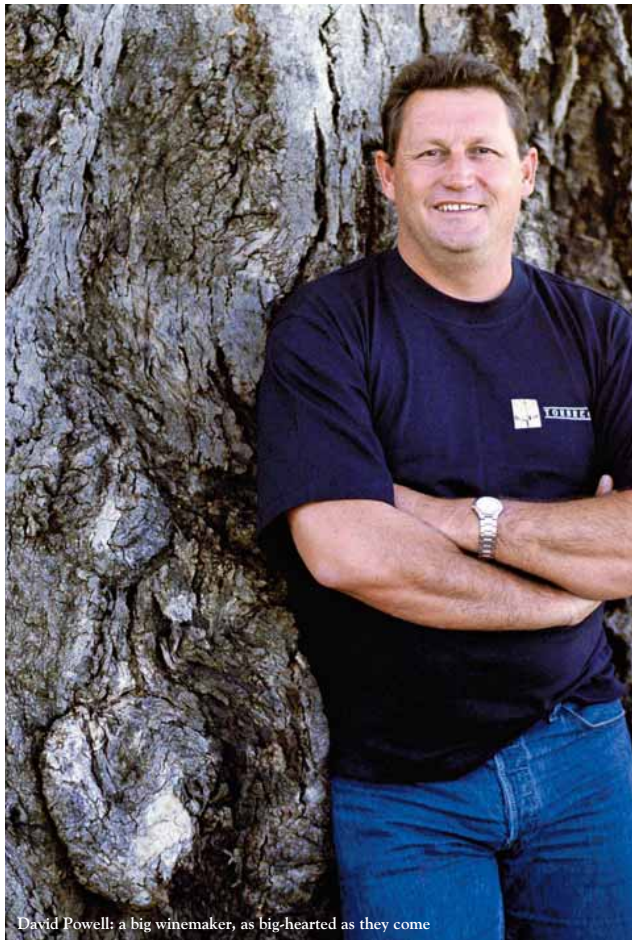
David Powell, *enfant terrible* of the wine world, takes his production and prices to new heights in just 15 years. **Stuart George** respects the man and likes the wine

Its cellar door doesn't have a wedding licence but Torbreck could be summarized as 'something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue'. The 'old' winery was constructed around a 120-year-old shed on Roennfeldt Road in Marananga, halfway between Tanunda and Nuriootpa. Next door to this now stands the A\$8.5 million 'new' 100,000-case capacity winery completed in 2008, presumably with money that was borrowed from the bank.

The air turns blue when David Powell, the big man behind this impressive establishment, opens his mouth to speak. He is a fast-talking, potty-mouthed trencherman who needs two double espressos, each with three sugars, to get him going in the morning after a typical night out. Even the ring tone on his phone is noticeably louder than most others.

Like his wines, the man himself polarizes opinion – and he certainly has plenty of opinions himself, many of which are unprintable. But he doesn't care. "Life's not a popularity contest. People can judge me by my wines," he says. He has the courage of his convictions, with a mind that penetrates like a saw through wood. Some people might find it difficult to argue with such an imposing presence.

Beneath the swearing and the smoking is a generous soul that looks after people. Every Torbreck grower receives a case of the wine that contains his or her grapes. The new winery was completed with all mod cons available for its staff – including a crèche. There is also a custom-built kitchen with A\$25,000 reduction hobs that Powell's



David Powell: a big winemaker, as big-hearted as they come



Harvesting Viognier grapes at Descendant Vineyard

friend, Tetsuya Wakuda of the eponymous Sydney restaurant, uses to create gargantuan dinners, chez Torbreck. Along with the generosity goes a surprising lack of ego. "I didn't want to name the winery after myself because that's pretentious," he says. "Nobody had heard of me, anyway."

A LUMBERJACK TURNED WINEMAKER

Adelaide born and bred, David Powell was destined to be a chartered accountant like his father. An uncle inspired an interest in wine but he ended up in Scotland in the 1980s in pursuit of a woman. He needed a job. So with his imposing physique, he found work as a lumberjack. The dangerous job earned him £1,000 a week and perhaps is one reason for his stentorian presence and loud ring tone. "I'm half-deaf because I never wore ear protection," he confesses.

The Scottish stint was part of a ten-year period of travel, which included working vintages in Spain, Italy and California. Powell says that essentially he learned to make wine in France, especially in the Rhône valley, which influenced him greatly.

"My marketing model is Guigal. The Descendant, Factor and Run Rig wines are my La La's." (La Mouline, La Landonne and La Turque – Guigal's single vineyard wines are often referred to as La La's).

His travels over, from the beginning of the 1992 vintage to the end of the 1997, Powell worked with Chris Ringland at the renowned Barossa Valley winemaking school of Rockford. "I left the day after the vintage and thought to myself, now what do I do?"

During his first couple of years at Rockford, Powell had found some ancient and hitherto neglected vineyards that he coaxed back to life. In 1994, Torbreck Vintners was formally established. He planted his 30 acres of vineyards at Marananga with Marsanne, Roussanne, Viognier and Shiraz. A period of extraordinary growth followed. The Hillside vineyards in Lyndoch were purchased in July 2002 and the Cellar Door opened in June 2003; Powell all the while maintained relationships with local grape growers.

The growth suddenly halted when Powell was financially crippled by his divorce. He was forced to sell-out, but regained control

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Callum and Owen, David Powell's sons, stomping grapes for 'The Celts', a wine that David makes with his boys

of Torbreck in August 2008 in conjunction with Peter Kight of Quivira Vineyards in Healdsburg, which has also set up Torbreck's own US importing arm. (Kight was looking for a vineyard and winery when he met Powell at a Torbreck tasting in Atlanta, GA). Torbreck took another blow when its UK importer Hayman Barwell Jones went bankrupt in January 2009. It was not a good time to be seeking a new agent to import expensive wines into the UK, but Powell has set his new Symington- and Torres-owned agent John E Fells five- and ten-year targets. He exports to 30 countries, with a

particularly strong interest in Japan, thanks to the connection with Tetsuya Wakuda.

From its first 140-case vintage in 1995, Torbreck has grown to 60,000 cases per year, or by 42.5 per cent. Of these, 30,000 cases are Woodcutter Shiraz. Although Torbreck has been producing wine for less than 15 years, there has been significant recognition for Powell's efforts. At the Vinality 40th anniversary tasting in 2006, "The Young Lions of Winemaking: The Way to the Future" with wines selected and presented by Serena Sutcliffe MW, Torbreck's Descendant 2004 was the only New World wine to be chosen. (Other wines included Cristal 1999, Guigal's Côte-Rôtie La Turque 2001, Gaja's Barbaresco 2001 and Pingus 2001).

And, of course, there are those Parker scores, notably the 99 points for the 2003 Run Rig. Despite the praise lavished on his wines stateside, Powell laments the 'assumptions' that people make about his wines because of the high scores.

"I think it shows that Parker's not as one-dimensional as people make him out to be. They assume the wines will be big and oaked, which is not my style. They're big, but they're balanced and elegant. A lot of the bloggers are saying that Torbreck is one of the few big reds that age well for seven or eight years."

In the early days little stock was retained, but Powell intends to keep back 10,000 cases within the next five years in order to release a few hundred cases of mature wines into the market each year.

SHIRAZ - NOT CABERNET

Powell does not believe that Cabernet suits the Barossa Valley. "This is Shiraz country, not Cabernet country. Bordeaux doesn't grow Shiraz," he says. Torbreck wines are mostly blends, of varieties and of vineyards. Fruit is sourced from 29 vineyards scattered across the Barossa and Eden Valleys, with the greater part in the western part of the Barossa to the west of Nuriootpa, where there is more clay in the red loam soils. "All the good vineyards are out this way," asserts Powell.

Torbreck has 200 acres of its own vineyards, with about as much again bought-in, all de facto organic. Despite the artisan, small-scale bottlings that made his name in the early part of 2009, Powell declares, "We'll never be entirely estate grown. Too much importance is put on the estate-grown model. Some of our best suppliers know more than I do about vineyards. They're witch doctors."

Nonetheless, he likes to keep a tight rein on his growers – they pick when he says, not when they want to. In the Descendant Vineyard next to the old winery, a second wire has been inserted into the trellis for the white vines, "to promote a better growth of canopy and better protection for the grapes from sun damage. It also allows for better fruit load," he notes.

Powell believes that it is soil and vine age that differentiate the terroirs and the wines made from them. "The wines all have their own personality. In the Barossa Valley alone there are more than 20 different soil types, from the red-brown earths and clays of the western slopes through to the sandy soils of the valley floor and the mostly podzolic soils of the eastern slopes and hills. In addition, there is a multitude of different aspects, elevations, rainfalls, and humidity levels that all contribute to the notion of 'terroir.'"

The winemaking process is essentially the same for all the wines until elevage in oak – de-stemming but no crushing; open-top tank fermentation of small batches; acidity added only when necessary, and absolutely no tannin added.

"We never add tannins. If you've got fruit tannin, you don't need wood tannin." With the exception of The Steading, which uses six-year-old American oak barrels purchased from Penfolds, only French oak is used. "Oak tannin doesn't soften," insists Powell. "Big oaky wines don't go with food." But despite his preference for French oak he adds, "I think The Steading is the best wine that I make, the one that best exemplifies what Torbreck is all about."



David Powell outside the Cellar Door

LAIRD OF THE VALLEY

Torbreck Wines can be expensive. The Laird 2005 will be released in 2010 at A\$700/US\$545. Powell's response to raised eyebrows at such exalted prices is a blunt, "Stop taking us for granted. I make no apologies for my prices. We make wines from some of the greatest vineyards in the world. Why shouldn't we charge high prices?"

A six-litre bottle of The Laird donated by Powell was sold for US\$22,000 at the 2009 Naples Wine Festival charity auction. "It went for more than five big bottles of Two Hands! Not that I'm competitive or anything," he says gleefully.

Powell is intensely loyal to the Barossa and constantly champions its viticultural resources: "We have the oldest living vineyards in the world. If these vineyards were in the Old World, they'd be Grand Cru."

But he is sometimes sharp in his assessments of his neighbours' wines. "They really don't believe in their vineyards. They think they're working with second rate varieties so they extract heavily." For him, it's all quite simple and easy: "If you can't make good wine from these vineyards, you shouldn't be doing this." ♦

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TASTING NOTES OF TORBRECK WINES

2008 Woodcutter's Semillon 3,500 cases produced. Semillon has long been grown in the Barossa but this is the only non-Rhône varietal in the Torbreck portfolio, based on 90-year old 'Madeira' clone vines. 50/50 tank and barrel fermented. Crisp, grapey and simple fruit, with some more complex barrel/malo flavours to add interest. Some grip on the finish. Good value.

2006 The Steading 5,000 cases produced. Made from the 'traditional' Barossan varieties – Grenache, Shiraz and Mataro (aka Mourvèdre). Deeper colour than the Cuvée Juveniles but styled in a similarly soft and fruity character. Two years in older French and American hogsheads has imprinted oak on the aromas more than on the structure. "My favourite of the wines that I make," says Powell.

2008 Cuvée Juveniles 6,000 cases produced. Named after Tim Johnston's Paris wine bar, with a label that bears a painting by Tim's daughter Carolyn. Created from the same blend and sites (with an average vine age of 90 years) as The Steading but unoaked. A bit jammy at first, but overall bright, juicy and easy-going. Fruit rather than oak tannins of course! Bottled under Stelvin, so more oxygen is left in the wine to counter any potential reduction problems.

2006 Les Amis 260 cases produced. Made by Powell for his friend Ignatius Chan, who owns a renowned restaurant in Singapore. This is a single-vineyard Grenache from the tiny 1.5 acre Homes vineyard, which was planted in 1901 and formerly supplied grapes for Seppelts Para. Oak is apparent on the palate, with some vanilla flavours and wood tannin noticeable – but it is not much to show for 18 months in new French barriques! Powell believes that Grenache is a warm climate Pinot Noir.

2007 Woodcutter Shiraz Torbreck's cash cow and the wine that more than any other has pushed the estate from 140 to 60,000 cases a year. The drought vintage of 2007 produced 20,000 cases, 15,000 less than in 2006. Fermented in cement, wood and steel vats before basket pressing and aging in well-seasoned hogsheads and French oak barrels for 12 months. Slightly jammy on the nose. Not as concentrated as some of the other wines but it has a lovely fleshy texture. "If you can't afford Run Rig, this is a good option. I'm glad to have it at the moment," says Powell.

2006 The Struie 5,000 cases produced. Named after the hill that overlooks Dornoch Firth on the far northeast coast of Scotland. A blend of Barossa Valley and Eden Valley grapes, hence the catch-all 'Barossa' on the label. Sweet,

ripe, luscious fruit, with a firm oak structure (20% in new French barriques for 18 months). On the finish, the fruit re-emerges at the end.

2006 The Factor 1,400 cases produced. Named after the Scottish term for the manager of a highland estate. "The most Barossan wine that we make," believes Powell. It is certainly bigger and heavier than the other wines, but is still relatively light on its feet compared to some other Barossa reds and it never becomes ponderous. "It has its place," he says. "This is how you can make a big wine with finesse."

2006 Descendant 1,000 cases produced. Another single-vineyard wine, from a block planted by Powell in 1994 next to the winery with cuttings from the Run Rig vineyards. He is an admirer of Clonakilla's Shiraz Viognier. "It's fabulous!" he says. "The Shiraz on its own is ridiculously over the top." So 8% Viognier is added to the blend, à la Côte-Rôtie. Descendant is made in a very particular fashion, with the Shiraz crushed straight on top of the already-lightly pressed Run Rig Viognier. The two grapes are then fermented together before maturation in ex-Run Rig barrels for 18 months. Another step up the Torbreck ladder, with the estate's characteristic texture – lush fruit balanced with some (wood) tannin – but very concentrated. Likened by Powell to "a girl in the back of a car..."

2005 Run Rig 1,200 cases produced. Typically Run Rig's Shiraz is sourced from eight vineyards across the Barossa, mostly named for their owners. Powell thinks that this is 'the easiest wine to make', basket-pressed and then aged in new and old (usually 60/30) French barriques for 30 months. For the final blend, 3-5% of Viognier is added. "Viognier gives nice aromatics but it can dilute the wine," Powell cautions. "However, with this bottling, Viognier really changes the personality; it becomes Run Rig."

After the super-intense 2004, this 2005 Run Rig is a welcome return to the more elegant and less-oaked late 1990s vintages, more fragrant than the other Torbreck wines, and perhaps with just a bit more length too. "Contrary to popular belief, Run Rig is not the 'biggest' wine we produce," says Powell. "In fact, as young wines, Descendant has more tannin and structure, and The Factor has more weight and body, but neither has the detail and exquisite balance that is the hallmark of Run Rig. It is a Tête de Cuvée, if you like; a barrel selection of our finest."

The wines listed are distributed in India by Sonarys and were tasted by Stuart George at Torbreck Vintners on 3 March 2009



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