

ENDS OF THE EARTH

IT'S A TOUGH ROAD STARTING YOUR OWN WINERY IN THE POPULAR REGION OF MARGARET RIVER.

Launching your very own label after a long career in the wine game is a little like jumping out of a plane without a parachute. Gone are the marketing and sales teams to help sell precious product, as are the winery team to get those mundane but essential tasks done, and the safety of a regular payday is nothing more than a distant memory.

But it also allows the ambitious winemaker to finally do it her way – pick the finest fruit she can find and give it all the tender loving care it needs in the winery. For Cath Oates, of Margaret River winery Oates Ends, the journey began in 2000, and has only now begun to bear fruit.

Much like many of Margaret River's best winemakers, Cath is a local, born and bred. Raised on farms in the area with cattle the primary source of income, Cath has spent plenty of time making wine for other people. She cut her teeth churning out wines across the Tasman in Marlborough and Central Otago. Then a recent gig bought her back to the West with Mount Barker's stalwart winery, Plantagenet Wines, as chief winemaker. But her heart was always primed for a return to her parents' Margaret River farm, conveniently located in the renowned sub-district of Wilyabrup.

The first microscopic vintages of Oates Ends from her parents' property were crafted in 2000, but just for family and friends. At the time the fruit from these vineyards was, and still is, bought by one of Margaret River's finest names for inclusion in one of the region's top cabernet sauvignons. But as the mechanical pickers shook fruit from these rows some bunches were inevitably missed, particularly at the row-ends, and that is where the original fruit for Oates Ends was sourced. These were offcuts that, while easily missed when fruit was picked at pace and by the tonne, could in the hands of the right winemaker form the basis for some delicious wines.

In 2007 the family farm was divided and viticulturist brother Russ took over the vineyard and fruit for a number of vintages was put aside for Cath's blend. This is a vineyard and plot of land that, while not organic or biodynamically managed, is handled with kid gloves and with ecological sustainability to the fore. Chickens wander through the rows with sheep rather than machinery used to pluck leaves and open up the canopy. Manure and compost are also used to feed vines wherever possible.

Come the 2014 vintage, Cath was ready to take off the first crop for a commercial release of Oates Ends, as she did again in 2015 and 2016. Fruit now was picked not from the offcuts of past vintages but from whole rows that had been quarantined for this little project. And little it is: for the 2014 and 2016 vintages – Cath could not get away for harvest in 2015 – each berry was picked by the winemaker. With only 40 barrels in the winery, which could easily get lost in a larger operation, this is winemaking at its most intimate where almost every part of the winemaking process, from pruning vines in the vineyard to racking barrels

NICK CUBBIN



late at night, has been completed by the proprietor. Perhaps in time Cath will get an assistant but the Oates End wines will always be raised from the single Estate originally owned by her parents.

At the moment, and for a handful more years, the Oates Ends wines will be limited to the rows she can have set aside from her brother Russ's vineyard. But not for long as planting on the other half of the original property is about to begin with classics such as cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay joined by less traditional varieties such as malbec. This is very much Cath's way, as seen in her first releases. Classic Margaret River is on show but with a twist – wild yeast and barrel fermented semillon sauvignon blanc blends, structural cabernet sauvignon and even a savoury tempranillo showing plenty of varietal character.

Yet despite having years of experience and a valuable vineyard to draw upon Oates is still wary of what she may have got herself in to. "It's incredibly satisfying making your very own wines. But I've put my life savings into Oates Ends and I'm petrified; terrified really. Plenty of good people have given it a go and not succeeded." A long apprenticeship has certainly given this winemaker invaluable experience that, when combined with superb vineyard resources and some outstanding first commercial releases, should mean that Oates Ends is one of the wineries that goes the distance. **W**

2015 OATES ENDS TEMPRANILLO

A cracking Australian tempranillo with plump, juicy, dark cherry fruit beautifully matched by some tobacco, spice and earthy nuances well supported by quite ample tannins. Long, compact and reserved it finishes with exceptional balance and will likely improve over the next decade.

2016 OATES ENDS SEMILLON SAUVIGNON BLANC

An unusual but delicious take on the classic Margaret River style, largely barrel fermented with wild yeasts and matured on lees to give superb complexity and textural richness. Understated herbal lanolin fruits mix with praline and spicy oak finishing with crisp acidity and fine length.

2014 OATES ENDS CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Deep ruby in colour, this exceptional Margaret River style is elegant and reserved with layers of powerful blackberry, blackcurrant, gravel and cedar fruits. Full bodied and firm, it shows well integrated and generous fine-grained tannins that promise plenty for the future.