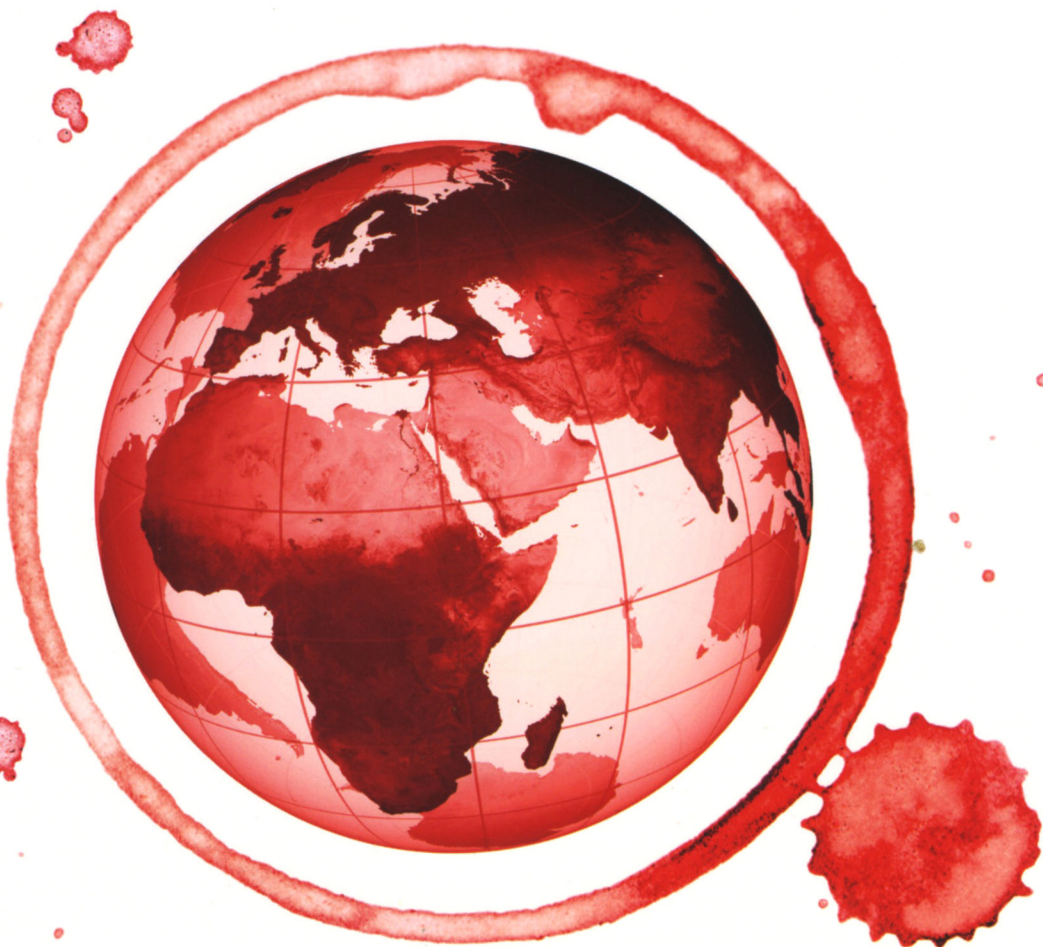


Halliday

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Natural wonder.

Minus machines and chemicals, Will Berliner tends to his 'garden' in WA's Margaret River, crafting chardonnay and cabernet under his Cloudburst label. Here, he tells his story.



Interview Jane Faulkner Photography Sarah Hewer

"Contrary to what some people might say, there was no grand plan with Cloudburst. It just evolved. We were in America, my wife's Australian and we came back looking for a property and found this land. It's unreal. We said this is the most beautiful place we've ever seen and we still feel that way. We bought 100 hectares in 2004 bordering a national park and we have bush for several kilometres and lots and lots of plants, peppi trees, wildflowers and so many orchids. I had never been in such a warm climate, but I wanted to grow fruit, avocados and the plan was to visit on a yearly basis.

Why Margaret River? I love the national park. I love the ocean. I love how everything's green and people grow things. I saw farms, lot of cows, and vineyards, which of course didn't mean anything to me other than the land is somewhat locked up in a certain way. I wasn't wine orientated, I was land orientated. Margaret River ticked the boxes.

Initially, I wanted to plant something to block out the road from where we wanted to build a house. We were going to grow avocados, but discovered they would be too expensive and being half-way around the world, not sustainable. It seemed logical to go into grapes and, as we're on Caves Road, the agronomist thought we had exceptional soils for vines.

I planted cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay in 2005, and in 2006 three more blocks including malbec. So, five blocks are producing with a few more coming on including a home block of cabernet by 2018, which seems to be on classic Wilyabrup soil. Everything is close planted, dry-grown, farmed organically with biodynamics.

Everything is done by hand. We weed by hand. We compost everything together with the exception of kikuyu. [It's invasive]... it's the most incredibly adapted grass. If you break off a runner, kikuyu secretes a poison knocking out potential competitors. The only spray I use is a seaweed extract in a compost tea mixed with some sulphur in the hope of keeping powdery mildew at bay. But I do not use copper, which is allowed in biodynamics. Why is it allowed? It's supposedly natural, but it kills everything. And I mean everything. My earth is alive and the thought of spraying something that's going to kill those organisms gives me the willies.

A star emerges

I took our first wine from the 2010 vintage back to America and some sommeliers in New York said 'This is freakin' great. It opens up like Montrachet, Bâtard-Montrachet, ooh wow Corton.' Really? Well Corton is creamier, but I can get there. I started selling first in the States. There was no marketing plan. I had to start my own import company and people bought the wine. I had to do it myself because no one wanted any in Australia. I have been asked, how, in such a short space of time, I could make these wines [and charge more than \$200 a bottle]? But it's not a few years. Growing stuff is not new for me. My whole life has been about studying plants, animals and connections. I've had gardens and the only thing new is it's grapes now, not apple trees.

I thought if I'm going to grow grapes, I'm going to do it really well. How, I don't know. But one thing happened - I met the Watsons [owners of Woodlands Estate where Cloudburst is vinified]. Stuart Watson took me on my first-ever barrel tasting and I was babbling on saying this was my dream. He said, 'You really understand something no one else does. You've got to meet my Dad' Stuart is one of my friends, co-winemaker and mentor, and his father David, also a mentor and incredibly generous, challenged me. He said, 'What do you want to do?' I want to make incredible wine. 'Like what?' I had no idea. He inspired me by opening bottles of Latour, Chateau d'Yquem... incredible wines. It was a revelation. I had a revelation. I didn't come to Margaret River with an idea to make an impact on the world of wine. I came to live in this beautiful place and try to make the most amazing wine I could because it interests me. I didn't come to make a large quantity of wine so I could sell it cheaply. I came to make a limited quantity of amazing wine, which I have done. I hope to continue to do so. In the interim, I've disrupted this, challenged that, stirred up the status quo. I really didn't come to do anything other than ask questions.

I'm a gardener. I'm doing my best to look and listen to something deeper than my training and knowledge [Will studied forestry at Yale University and later, wine at University of California, Davis]. In the vines, I've gone the long way around and most contemporaries - I'm not talking about Margaret River or Australia - ask why. It's very costly. Well, I'm cognisant of the costliness of our attitude. We end up doing things for expedience, economics or egotism. We feel we are entitled to the gifts coming our way, never realising it's not because we're good or deserving, but simply because that's what nature does. I have a gift of an astonishing site, in this remarkable place, among some absolutely exceptional people. I came not for commerce, but something else. Call it spirit.



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Will Berliner, Cloudburst

