

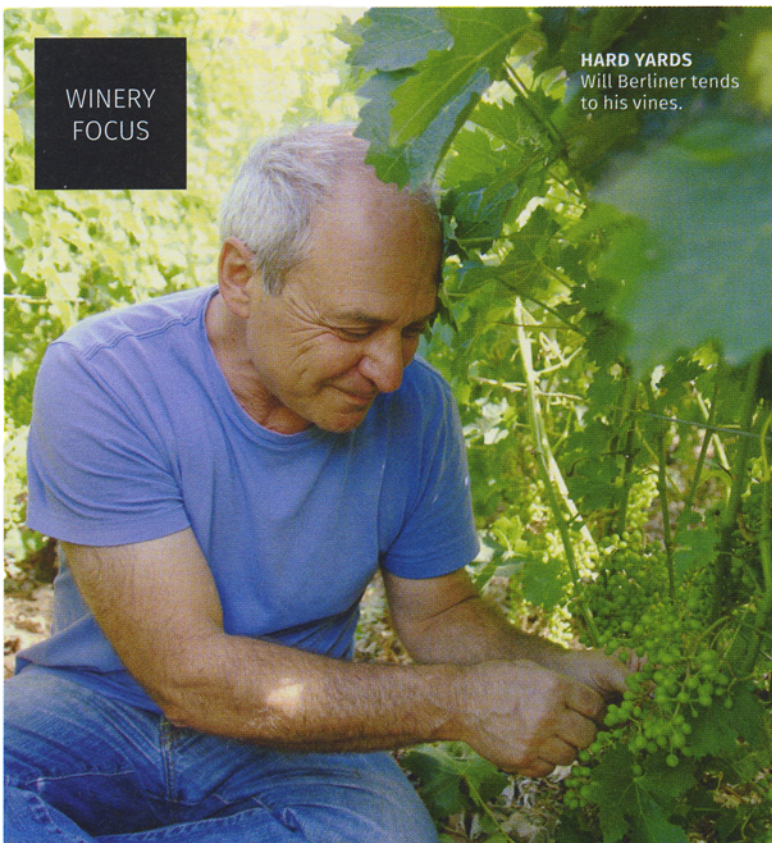
TEXT JULIAN TOMPKIN

THE IN CLOUD

Margaret River never had a bigger surprise than when Will Berliner's Cloudburst charged onto the scene.

DAZZLING DEBUT
Cloudburst's
Will Berliner.

HARD YARDS
Will Berliner tends
to his vines.



Will Berliner is vexed. “He was so brutal.” The Cloudburst founder punches his fist down in frustration as he decries a casual worker who has just knocked off for the day. “He was tearing at that canopy with no care whatsoever. He was fighting with the vines, not working with them. I mean, everyone just needs to slow down.”

Berliner knows all about slowing down. Prior to greeting me on his property in Margaret River’s prized Wilyabrup subregion, he had literally been trundling on hand and knee through his plants, hand-weeding and painstakingly unfurling tendrils.

“There are no shortcuts here, mate,” he says defiantly, his American accent oddly accentuating the doctrinal Australian pleasantry. “Absolutely everything is done by hand – this is the definition of handmade. Then everything goes back into the compost. The only thing that leaves this place is the juice.”

That juice has propelled Berliner from utter obscurity into the wine lists of some of the world’s most fabled eateries – most notably in the US, where a great deal of his wine is imported and eulogised. A native of Maine on the north-east US coast, Berliner produced and directed films in the 90s and also founded an adventure-wear company – not that he’s willing to digress (“I don’t see what it has to do with Cloudburst,” he dismisses. “It’s completely irrelevant.”).

What is less opaque, however, is that Berliner’s Australian wife Alison Jobson was through with Siberian-esque winters and lobbied for a return to the more courteous climes of her home country. That was the early 2000s and – despite her being a NSW native – the couple and their



family eventually settled on a gorgeous piece of bushland in Margaret River, originally cleared by the Palandri family.

Berliner admits he had no interest in wine when he bought the West Australian property. “I didn’t drink it and my wife still doesn’t,” he crows. Nature abruptly intervened when an agronomist informed him the site was unsuited to his bounty of choice, avocado trees. But grapevines, he was told, would take well to the soil, composed of lateritic granite underlaid with clay and topped with beach sand, blown in from the nearby shores of the simmering Indian Ocean and its fabled surf breaks.

Berliner enrolled in viticulture and pursued sage advice, most notably from his Wilyabrup neighbour David Watson, of Woodlands, who would become his mentor and friend. In 2005, after mulching the loam with experimental panaceas including bark and seaweed, he began planting – first cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, and later malbec. Today plantings total just 1.2 hectares – a mere dewdrop in the punchbowl compared with neighbours such as Cape Mentelle, with a more commercially sober 150 hectares under cultivation.

Indeed, Cloudburst could well have remained destined for eternal obscurity were it not for Woodlands winemaker Stuart Watson, who suggested Berliner enter his inaugural 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon in the 2013 Margaret River Wine Show – never mind the mere trivialities that Berliner had no producer’s license, no wines in market and no necktie. By the night’s end a new epoch in Margaret River wine had been etched; Cloudburst had taken out Best Single Vineyard Estate Red, Best Cabernet Sauvignon and Best Red Wine of the Show.

The first thing that you notice when entering Cloudburst – beyond the peppermints and karri cincturing the estate, and the coastal zephyr – is how clustered the vines are. “I’m creating a forest of vines,” Berliner explains. “I’m not cultivating.” The plants and rows are both spaced one metre apart with no row more than 30 metres long, creating one deeply verdurous body with rows barely indistinguishable from a distance. The second thing you notice is

NO SHORTCUTS
Employees are taught to work with the vines.



“This is a late-in-life project for me. I don’t have time to screw it up.”

how virile the plants appear. All vines are own rooted and unirrigated, and only ever lightly treated with sulphur and milk sprays. And while he largely operates according to biodynamic principles (“Yes, there are a few cow horns buried here”), Berliner is quick to lambast it as outmoded voodoo.

“Rudolf Steiner was a genius responding to a specific problem in Germany post-war, but then suddenly it’s canonical,” he says, somewhat exasperated. “It’s like, ‘hold on with the mythology, it’s less than 100 years old’. It was a specific response to a specific time and place and problem. How about we address issues specific to this hemisphere and this country and this region today?”

Berliner is quick to draw distinction between Cloudburst and its Margaret River peers, despite the fact he works exclusively with the region’s totemic varieties. “I didn’t want to do what anyone else was doing – not in Margaret River, not anywhere,” Berliner states of Cloudburst, named for a histrionic tempest that detonated over his vineyard during its very first harvest in 2010.

“I was the butt of everyone’s jokes,” he continues, leading me deep into one of the rows with its cathedral-like canopy. “They used to ask what I was doing in the vegetable patch. People would drive by and honk; they were telling me to rip out the two middle vines, and I heard that right up to the night I won those awards. Yeah, they were full of advice – the main one of course being that I’d be a fool to plant cabernet in ‘that beach sand’. Huh!”

If Cloudburst’s sensational debut at the Margaret River Wine Show wasn’t unsettling enough for the resident establishment, Berliner boldly made it the priciest new-release wine in the entire region. The chardonnay sells for a cool A\$250 and the cabernet costs A\$275. All this from an interloping greenhorn with juvenile vines, whose first choice was avocados. It’s fair to say that more than the odd eyebrow was cocked.

“You’ve got to applaud his tenacity,” one local winemaker tells me, on condition of anonymity. “You’ve either got to be brave or stark-raving mad to size up to Cullen and

Leeuwin the way he did, as a complete novice and outsider. Margaret River hasn’t seen a shake up quite like it. It’s like arriving uninvited to the party and eating the entire cake.”

Berliner remains unmoved. “Tall poppies, man. I’ve had to learn about that the hard way. I don’t have to justify the price of my wines. No one goes to Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and demands they justify how they price their wines. I pulled weeds on my hands and knees for eight hours today, and I do that most days. This is extremely labour intensive; it’s not cost-effective. But taste it and then tell me it doesn’t add up. It’s Cloudburst; that’s what it is. Nothing else tastes like that.”

What’s certain is the fruit is exceptional. The cabernets show great maturity despite the young vines with a tendency for a generous mulberry nose, definite clove-like spice and stewed plum on the palate as well as great acidity and tannic balance. While less enigmatic, the chardonnays are no less striking with butter-scotch on the nose and notable oak counterbalanced by a curious but refreshing green apple acidity and a vibrant, clean finish.

Berliner insists that he refuses to “play the game” – he has no cellar door, no PR or marketing agency and no on-site winery (yet). He has no off-license distribution with his wines all sold through mailing list and to restaurants. “I know it sounds like a great story, but none of this was engineered,” Berliner states. “This is a late-in-life project for me. I don’t have time to screw it up. I’ve learnt so much in such a short time and I’m always learning more. The vines are my teachers.”

Clasping a bottle of his 2014 Chardonnay, with its strikingly austere label, he continues. “I guess I’m not really looking at it the same way [as other local winemakers]. I’m just not capable of that. They have their ways and means, and they need to justify and defend those. I have nothing to defend or justify. I simply want to make something astonishing that moves you and gives you joy. There are exceptional wines, but then there’s exceptional Cloudburst. This is a gift. Cloudburst is a gift to all of us.” 🍷

