

THE BUYER

CONNECTING THE PREMIUM ON-TRADE

How Cloudburst became an Aussie cult wine in less than 10 years

Even by today's standards the story behind Margaret River's Cloudburst is an exceptional one. How an American biologist looking for a new lease on life, plants vines against advice and, from a half hectare plot and with five year-old vines, wins the top Cabernet Sauvignon gongs with his very first vintage in Margaret River of all places. Peter Dean tastes the wines with Will Berliner, owner and winemaker.



By [Peter Dean](#) October 18, 2017

The Cloudburst wines – Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Malbec – are all medium-bodied, elegant and restrained in alcohol, and are all consistently spectacular to taste.



If the three criteria for a cult wine are rarity, high cost and exceptional quality then Cloudburst is the archetypal cult wine.



Everything is done by hand, including the bottle number.

What is even more extraordinary is that Cloudburst has achieved cult status and made lists in all the top restaurants in less than a decade and in a way that would make the synopsis of a very passable feature film....

Just after selling his outdoor clothing business, ageing American biologist Will Berliner is hit by the Global Financial Crisis, sets up a new life with his Australian wife and kids in Australia's Margaret River, goes against advice and plants vines instead of avocados. Decides to do things *his* way and, from vines just five years old beats off the top competition at the Margaret River Wine Show taking the top three gongs for Cabernet Sauvignon with his very first vintage...

Berliner would be played by Richard Dreyfuss ("We're going to need a bigger vineyard!") and his wife by Nicole Kidman, of course. Bryan Brown would have a cameo as the disgruntled head of the judges who turns away in disgust when the winner is announced, followed by a sea of sun hats being thrown into the air by the cheering crowd.



Will Berliner, Fine+Rare, London, September 2017

This achievement, winning Best Cabernet Sauvignon, Best Red Wine and Best Single Vineyard Estate Red Wine for his 2010 vintage in the 2013 show is in a region noted for the finest Cabernet Sauvignon, of course. And the trophies were won under the noses of Berliner's illustrious and better known neighbours.

It's like Ben Stokes deciding he'll have a go at golf during his international hiatus, going to Augusta and winning the US Open.

When you consider that Berliner's vineyard is just 1.2 hectares small with only half of it planted, you begin to see what a jaw-dropping achievement it is.

"Young vines can do it – it's not a reflection of age it's a reflection of treatment," says Berliner with a smile, summing up his entire *modus operandi*.

So are the neighbours still talking to you?

"Of course, that year it was my turn the next year it will be someone else's. The prize is a box to tick, I don't think of it as anything other than a box, and it's not my box."

As to the secret of his success he puts it succinctly.

"I'm in a place that's not messed up and I haven't messed it up."

He elaborates with detail on how he has brought his own horticultural knowledge (a Yale degree in Biology, and a UC Davis oenology programme) to bear on a small plot of land that is clearly ideal for growing grapes.

Everything is done by hand, with biodynamic principles, minimal intervention and a keenness to learn from the *terroir*.

It's an attitude he has, a natural curiosity and an affinity with plants.



"I'm in a place that's not messed up and I haven't messed it up."

Throughout our hour-long tasting he talks about how "the vineyard called", "when the grapes found me," and how he "focuses on what the grapes are telling me." He describes how he takes the time to sit in the vineyard and work out why things are happening in the way that they are.

Having said that he doesn't follow biodynamics like a dictat,

"It's treated like a bleeping horoscope. Really? How literal can you be? I resist dogma. I'm not a joiner. I'm agnostic, but having said that, on my death bed, will I take the last rites?"

Berliner says he prefers to do what seems right and natural. He says he didn't use arsenic-treated fence posts like he was advised to do, but used local Wandoo timber instead that's naturally termite-proof with no need to treat it.

Given the labour-intensive nature of his technique, Cloudburst wines have a per bottle DPD price tag of £85.70 for the Chardonnay, £102.90 for the Cabernet Sauvignon and also the Malbec. And, even then, Berliner is not making much profit. He is apologetic about the cost and seems almost disconnected.

“I don’t think about the commerce, I have never been driven by commerce... I am in the service of things and happy to be of service.”

So this is all fine and dandy, but are the wines any good?



Happily, the wines are exceptionally good. Outrageously pure and focused in some cases. We taste Chardonnay 2012-5, Cabernet Sauvignon 2011-4 and Malbec 2012-4.

Overall, all of the wines are medium bodied, elegant wines with moderate alcohol. There is vintage variation consistent with Berliner’s winemaking style, although each of them has tremendous clarity, balance and unbridled pleasure.

Technique-wise the Chardonnay is rigorously sorted, whole-bunch pressed, straight into barrel (a third new, third last year's and a third two years old), the wine is unracked, unfinned and sulphured at the end of fermentation. The new 2015 release has stunning phenolics, a richness, length and breadth that will blow off. The 2014 shows how that purity and complexity develops while the 2013 was out of this world – a Chassagne Montrachet ringer with superb minerality, salinity and citrus notes.

The Cabernet Sauvignon is more Cullen than Moss Wood in style with a zingy texture and purity. They can drink now but will be spectacular in years to come. The Malbec was also delicious – especially to a man who has never much liked his Malbecs in the past.

I tell Berliner that the style reminds me of Patagonian Malbec, Bodega Noemia in particular. “You’re the second critic that has said that to me, James Suckling said the same thing to me.” Thanks I’ll take that!

Holding a glass of his very fine Chardonnay up to the light he says “I could never have imagined this to have come from my land, it is inconceivable. I never thought about being a cult wine, I was driven by making a great wine. I am constantly amazed how the world works...”

Cloudburst wines are distributed exclusively in the UK by Fine+Rare