

Hugely enjoyable tastings with the owners and/or winemakers of Cloudburst.

Cloudburst

Will Berliner's famous and famously priced Cabernets spend 19 to 22 months in oak, and include 4–7% Malbec. 'A little goes a long way', he says. He was introduced to the variety (and to fine wine in general) by Dana B Street, a local restaurateur in Maine, who opened his eyes to the generosity of right-bank red bordeaux. 'I learnt that Cabernet Sauvignon needs a foil, and seized on Malbec.' But he describes its very small production as 'wild and feminine'. The leftovers are bottled as varietal Malbec, which has become 'that culty thing'.

As for Chardonnay, this is Berliner's most important variety for the moment (though he is planting for red wine vines) on 0.4 ha (1 acre). His mentor Dana introduced him to Coche-Dury wines and he was impressed by the fact that 'those guys are in the vines more than others. I feel their wines have a certain richness to them. I asked Kermit Lynch, should I filter and fine? Coche don't. At first I was aiming for Coche but now I'm aiming for Cloudburst style.' His wines certainly don't show much trace of the reductive quality of Coche Meursaults – they seemed much more warm climate than that to me.

He's aiming for 'homeostasis' of the vineyard rather than having to add mineral supplements. I asked whether he was bothered by any pests or diseases. 'We do get some mildew so I do a minimal sulphur and seaweed treatment on the leaves. Weevils are the main local vine pest and they strike at night. So I go out with a jar and patrol the edges where they hang out. I think there are natural defence mechanisms in plants that can be triggered. I never see weevil damage spreading.'

Berliner is extremely keen on natural, sustainable methods and believes in plant communication so I asked him if he was certified organic? 'I think we're way beyond the ticking of the boxes', he said. 'I'm glad when other people certify and I'm looking out for it, but my cult [his group of avid customers in the US] knows the extent I go to. For instance, we have this runner grass from South Africa which runs very deep and secretes its own herbicide which kills the plant. At first the Demeter certifiers said I'd never get rid of it and suggested I try Roundup. No!'

More on this producer on Saturday.

Cloudburst Chardonnay 2013 Margaret River

2,888 bottles made.

Quite rich with the merest hint of Coche reduction. Really round fruit yet lively and vibrant. This has lasted well but is fruit-dominated rather than subtle and savoury. Well made.

Drink

2016

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2021

Imported into the UK by Fine+Rare

16.5

Cloudburst Chardonnay 2015 Margaret River

2,500 bottles made.

Very rich and spicy – quite California! Though, miraculously, it's not too fat. Superior and chock full of fruit.

Drink

2017

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2022

Imported into the UK by Fine+Rare

16.5

Cloudburst Chardonnay 2017 Margaret River

2,500 bottles made. First vintage made in the new, cooler winery that allowed a longer fermentation. Minimal lees stirring with natural malolactic fermentation. Rich, exotic nose but there's some subtle, refreshing transparency here. This was a cooler year, apparently. It really dances on the palate and is more persistent than the earlier vintages.

Drink

2019

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2025

Imported into the UK by Fine+Rare

17.5

Cloudburst Cabernet Sauvignon 2012 Margaret River

2,100 bottles made.

Very pure, intense nose. The palate is a little less intense but there are still lots of round, fine tannins and this wine should have a few more years of pleasure to give.

Drink

2015

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2023

Imported into the UK by Fine+Rare

17

Cloudburst Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 Margaret River

2,800 bottles made. 40–50% new oak. 'I'm using more because I think the Cabernet loves it', says Will Berliner. (The 2013, priced at AU\$500, is sold out.)
Intense nose with notes of balsam. This is mildly herbal and lighter than the 2012.

Drink

2016

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2024

Imported into the UK by Fine+Rare

16.5

Cloudburst Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Margaret River

1,700 bottles made.

Intense but very pure nose. This seems like essence of claret rather than full and bumptious. Very fresh. Note the low alcohol. This is my favourite of the three Cloudburst Cabernets I had a chance to taste with Will Berliner, owner of Cloudburst.

12.5%

Drink

2019

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2027

Imported into the UK by Fine+Rare

17.5

Cloudburst Malbec 2015 Margaret River

400-odd bottles made. (I don't know why Malbecs were served young-to-old and the Cabernets old-to-young but this was a rather hurried tasting at 67 Pall Mall before Berliner was due to give a masterclass.)

Rather tamer on the nose compared with the 2017. A tad skinny on the palate but still *sui generis*.

Drink

2018

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2022

Imported into the UK by Fine+Rare

16.5

Cloudburst Malbec 2017 Margaret River

400-odd bottles.

Deep crimson. Lacks the gaminess of some Malbecs and it's really quite fine. *Sui generis*. Salty and refreshing but with some wild richness too. Well done! Though not yet ready.

Drink

2020

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2026

Imported into the UK by Fine+Rare

16.5 +