



TEXT HUON HOOKE

On Cloud Nine

With his 2014 Cloudburst Cabernet Sauvignon featured in the recent Margaret River 50th Anniversary celebration tasting, Will Berliner is Margaret River's man of the moment.

WILL BERLINER IS nothing if not his own man. He does things differently and is an original thinker. If selling his first vintage Cloudburst Cabernet Sauvignon for \$150 in the US didn't send out a signal, it should have.

Berliner arrived in Margaret River just 12 years ago, and while he does things on a pocket handkerchief scale, he is fearless and uncompromising in his beliefs, especially those relating to organic farming.

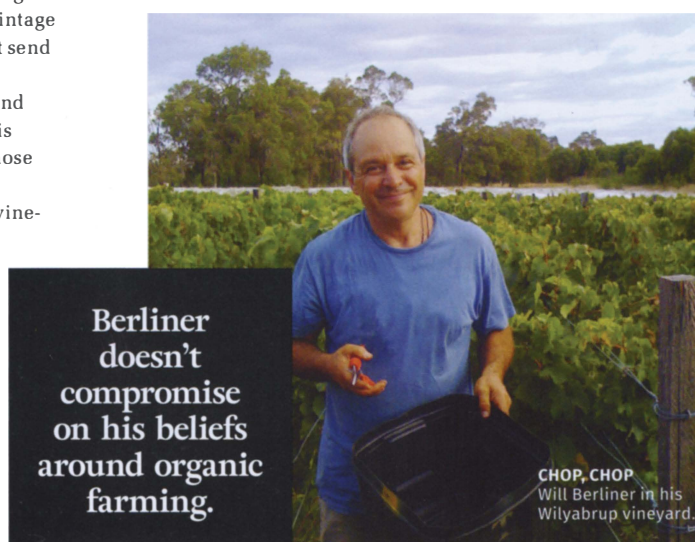
Consider these facts. When selecting the land for his vineyard in Wilyabrup, he deliberately chose a block that had never been cultivated and never had chemicals sprayed on it. This steadfast stance is the reason why his vineyard has an infestation of kikuyu grass. This pesky grass was brought to the area from South Africa as fodder for stock, but it got away. Now it's a pest: even if you try to smother it with black plastic, it sends out runners several metres long, which traverse amazing distances in search of sunlight.

Berliner's answer is to pull it up whenever he finds it and burn it. This would be impossible on 50 hectares, but is possible on his vineyard, which is less than one hectare. At the same time, his curiosity led him to plant a small test area of vines deliberately into a patch of kikuyu, just to see what happened. Would they survive? The vines are now five years old and still scrawny, but they are alive. Some day they will produce grapes, and he will make a wine. Perhaps the Kikuyu Block will have a special terroir of its own.

When asked how many hectares of vines he has, Berliner replies circuitously. "Everything we've produced so far has come from this vineyard, which has five patches, each 1/10 of a hectare (1,000 vines at a spacing of one metre by one metre: about four times the density of most Australian vineyards)," he says. "So, 5/10 [1/2] of a hectare."

There is another 3/10 of a hectare of chardonnay not yet in production. It takes him six years to get a crop, because he doesn't irrigate or 'push' the vines in any way. We taste the 2016 chardonnay and he mentions the production figure: 2,288 bottles. It's creamy-lees scented, rich and full of flavour with a slight phenolic grip. It's slightly cloudy because it's unfiltered and only lightly filtered.

Then the 2015 cabernet sauvignon (1,888 bottles): very herbal, just 12.5 per cent alcohol, tamarillo-scented, elegant and tight, but slightly raw at this stage. Finally, the 2015 malbec (488 bottles): a gorgeous wine, beautifully



ripe, spicy and generous. And once again I'm reminded how important malbec has always been in this region. It was among Tom Cullity's first plantings 50 years ago and still provides a vital component of the top-end Vasse Felix cabernets.

In the region's 50th birthday celebration tasting, Berliner was honoured to have his 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon served, one of 19 cabernets spanning 1982-2017. It's a superb, elegant wine, exuding violet, blueberry, raspberry and dried herb aromas. Fresh, vibrant, youthful, and seven per cent malbec.

Berliner's unusual vineyard habits include planting the vine cuttings directly into the ground and training the head of the vine very low, just 45 centimetres off the ground. Most Australian vineyards are at least a metre.

Berliner uses a lot of mulch and compost, and doesn't cultivate. He's never cultivated. This is to encourage the finer vine roots to grow and explore the soil fully. "The roots and mycelium connect under the surface," he says, "so that all of the vines are interconnected. I think this creates a kind of intelligence, but not as we humans understand intelligence."

It's a very appealing idea. 🍷

