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**WILD BUNCH**

From left: Alex Schulkin, James Erskine, Anton van Klopper and Gareth Belton.

# Basket case

A small community is making a big impression with some of the hottest wine labels in the country, writes **Max Allen**.

**Open the wine list** in almost any trendy restaurant and look at the wines by the glass. Chances are that at least two – and a few more bottles on the list – will come from a tiny enclave of the Adelaide Hills called Basket Range.

Lucy Margaux, Jauma, Ochota Barrels, BK Wines, The Other Right, Gentle Folk – these are some of the hottest labels in Australian wine right now, at the forefront of the natural, low-intervention, minimal-additions trend. And the winemakers behind these labels all work – and in most cases live – around the corner from each other: a small community making a huge impression on the Australian wine scene.

There have been moments like this before: when the right people converge at the right place at the right time and take Australian wine culture in a new direction. It happened in the 1960s, when visionaries such as Max Lake established new boutique wineries in the Hunter Valley; it happened in the '70s when a group of vine-mad doctors dreamed up a wine culture in Margaret River; in the '80s when Peter Lehmann and others revived the Barossa's fortunes.

This time, what's drawn these people together in the wild hills of the Basket Range is a roughly shared philosophy of how wine should be made – with wild yeasts, as little added or taken away as possible, lots of skin contact, no filtration, and just the barest addition

of sulphur at bottling. All the winemakers share this sensibility to varying degrees, even though the wines seem different – the perfumed precision of the Ochota Barrels Weird Berries in the Woods gewürztraminer is a world away from the autumnal funk of Lucy Margaux's Domaine Lucci Wildman Pinot Noir.

One of the group's biggest supporters is Campbell Burton, sommelier at Melbourne's Builders Arms and the organiser of Handmade and SoulFor Wine festivals. He speaks for many in the trade when he raves about the group.

"I'm so excited about what's going on in that little pocket of the hills," he says. "There's a progressiveness up there: everyone is having a crack, searching for how to make more delicious wine more simply, and sharing what they've learned with each other."

Importantly, Burton says, this isn't just a bunch of hippies flying by the seat of their tie-dyed pants. There's a lot of intellectual firepower and life experience behind these winemakers' decisions to throw away the rule book: Anton van Klopper of Lucy Margaux was a standout student at the University of Adelaide's winemaking course and worked in a large winery before planting his own vineyard; Jauma's James Erskine studied soil science and was named *Gourmet Traveller* Sommelier of the Year before establishing his wine business; Gentle Folk's Gareth Belton is doing PhD research into seaweed when he's not making wine and cider; The Other Right's Alex Schulkin is a scientist at the Australian Wine Research Institute.

Basket Range is a secluded, tree-filled bit of the Adelaide Hills, and although a few vineyards have been planted here since the '80s, the crumpled topography prevents too much development. Some of the local winemakers have their own plots of vines: Anton and Sally van Klopper's house and winery sheds overlook a biodynamic pinot vineyard; Taras and Amber Ochota have a patch of gamay vines on their block. But most of the winemakers buy their grapes from vineyards across the wider region and further afield. Brendan Keys from BK Wines, for example, cherry-picks chardonnay, pinot, syrah and other varieties for his tangy, textural whites and reds from vineyards in various pockets of the Adelaide Hills such as Lobethal, Lenswood, Piccadilly. James Erskine sources grapes for his outstanding Jauma grenaches from top sites in McLaren Vale such as the Wood vineyard, while Alex Schulkin's wild The Other Right Fire Head grenache comes from a vineyard at Vine Vale in the Barossa.

Anton van Klopper is arguably the most influential character in the Basket Range group, his own approach helping to inspire others – Erskine, Belton and Schulkin in particular – to establish their own wine businesses.

"When I started 10 years ago, I did the opposite of everything I was taught at winemaking school," says van Klopper. "I was fighting for a cause: making wine in a wild way that was sound, that had structural integrity. I helped others get started because I wanted people doing interesting stuff. And now the cause is here." ●

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