

THE MOST EXCITING WINERY YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF



On the Mornington Peninsula, vigneron Sandro Mosele is about to release the first wines from Elanto, a label and vineyard he co-owns with tech titans Elizabeth and Tony Todaro. **Jane Faulkner** reveals why this label is one to watch. 📖

THERE'S NO SIGNAGE for Elanto Vineyard so it remains hidden from view, the only marker a century-old chicory kiln at the entrance. But follow the long driveway over a crest and a spectacular view to Western Port Bay and Phillip Island unfurls on the left, while opposite, the jewel in the crown – Australia's most exciting and exacting vineyard venture to date. It's also the largest high-density site, too.

Such acclaims are all elements at this Balnarring property on the Mornington Peninsula because only someone like vigneron Sandro Mosele could have orchestrated it given the level of detail, precision, and expense, of which none has been spared, since its inception in 2018. The 10.6 ha vineyard is meticulous as is the work to tend it and make wines from just two varieties – chardonnay and pinot noir.

Why only two?

"They are the best (for the region and generally) for quality red and white," says Sandro. "And pragmatically, I like them anyway." So, anyone wondering where the former Kooyong winemaker has been for past few years, aside from a short stint at Ten Minutes By Tractor, he's been laying the foundation for this vineyard, close planted to a density of 11,111 vines per hectare, in rows spaced 1.2 metres x 0.75 metres. More important than those numbers, each plant is limited to six to eight grape bunches with the total fruit weight on each vine hovering around 500 grams. That's intense. The result is small, beautiful bunches of concentrated flavour. By comparison, most other Australian vineyards of note would yield anywhere between 1.4 to 4 kilograms per vine. It's obvious quality control is off-the-charts.

"I had one last shot to make wine without any compromises and here it's all about the best quality I can produce," he says. "This is my chance to put into practice all the best practices I've learnt and seen around the world in other great vineyards. This is the culmination of everything. It's about making the most of our terroir and it starts with HD (high-density)."

WHILE SANDRO is a co-owner in the business, credit also goes to Elanto's principals, Elizabeth and Tony Todaro (Elanto is a contraction of their first names). While they are tyros, from day one they believed in what this bare patch of land could grow into, embracing the project wholeheartedly.

How refreshing and purposeful. Who are these visionary folk? The Todaros own Clevertronics, a specialised tech company making emergency lighting including exit signs. The winery is full of these lights, so yes, a safe exit will always be obvious! In 2017, Tony met Sandro at a tasting, and they connected immediately. The idea of establishing a high-end vineyard to craft high-end wines seeded quickly. For Sandro, it was not only good fortune having the Todaros onboard but also luck finding the right site. "After studying HD as a way of growing, you understand you need soils that encourage deep roots, not shallow roots. I needed volcanic, free-draining soils. I didn't want a north-facing site and least favourite is west-facing. We ended up with this south-east slope on red volcanic soil. There's a freshness coming off the coast thanks to the proximity to the water, cooling the site and bringing freshness to the wines."

However, buying the 22-hectare block was conditional on a 'terroir' report from soil guru Claude Bourguignon.

Sandro met the French soil scientist/microbiologist through Rob Walters in January 2018. Rob, owner of Bibendum Wine Co, an import/distribution business, is the first to investigate thoroughly and put into practice a high-density site culminating in Place of Changing Winds in the Macedon Ranges. Yes, others such as Bass Phillip and William Downie have close-planted vines, but Rob took a holistic approach like no other, pushing the boundaries and consulting experts. At his behest, Claude came to Australia.

For context, Claude with wife Lydia, founded the Laboratory for Microbiological Analysis of Soils in France. They analyse and evaluate structures and chemical elements to determine whether a site has good 'terroir', as he calls it, or not. It's a complex subject, a story for another time.

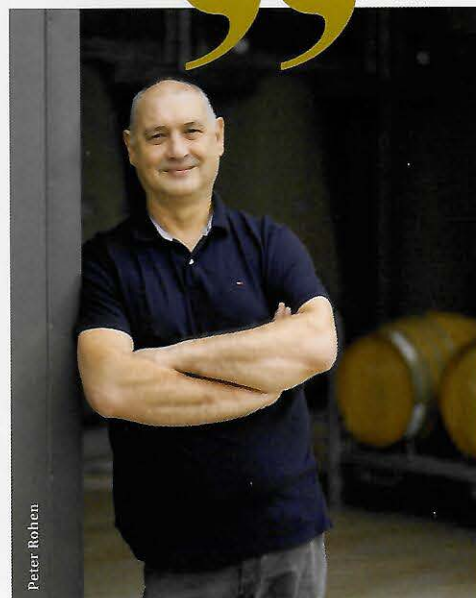
Claude examined the Balnarring property, which meant digging a dozen holes down to three metres, big enough for the Frenchman to get into.

"There were grass roots going all the way down and Claude gets halfway into a hole and looks up and says, who's buying this? We are," says Tony. "His reply, sign! Then he said I want to come back and taste your wine one day."

Sandro adds: "Part of what I took away from his visit was if you have shallow roots, you'll have a wine that expresses varietal

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Peter Rohlen



character. But if you want wines to express terroir, you need deep roots." HD is the conduit.

Of course, there are naysayers. Sandro's heard all the flimsy comments from those who don't farm this way, saying 'HD works in Burgundy but won't work in Australia' to 'HD is just an experiment.' Er, no. HD is expensive (to set up) and hard work; they are the distractors.

And Sandro points out, "the right site is what counts. HD on its own doesn't make better wine, it only enables you to make better wine on a site that offers potential." Elanto fits the bill.

From the beginning, Tim Brown, Australia's leading high-density viticulturist, helped Sandro set up the vineyard architecture including the layout, ensuring the right drainage and more. "Tim has been instrumental and we made a lot of decisions together." And so, in 2019, multiple clones of chardonnay and pinot noir on various rootstocks were planted. No herbicides are ever used, and while Elanto started out with organic certification, the '23 and '24 seasons were fraught with disease pressure from powdery and downy mildew. The latter can be devastating, and non-organic sprays had to be used. It is still farmed with organic principles and Sandro hopes to return to certification one day.

ELANTO is a singular pursuit, which is why there will be no other varieties planted, no other add-ons including no cellar door or restaurant to distract. Quality starts in the vineyard but ends with the bottled wine, so there's a level of sophistication with the equipment and winery, which is a gamechanger. While there's climate control, the entire building including the roof is clad with cooling, fire-rated ASKIN Performance Panels, the ones used in cool rooms.

Elanto chardonnay Single Vineyard Balnarring 2023, \$85

The inaugural release and it's a beauty. It entices immediately with aromas of citrus blossom, ginger flower, struck flint and warm, woody spices. There's a savouriness within alongside grapefruit and pith with lemon-infused creamy lees, grilled nuts and oak spice, all adding layers of texture. It's moreish thanks to a whisper of sulphides and while the fuller-bodied palate is shapely, super fine acidity extends the length and ties everything together. JF 13.5% alc.

Elanto pinot noir Single Vineyard Balnarring Mornington Peninsula 2023, \$85

Never in a million years would I pick the vine age given detail and complexity here. Fruit off four-year-old vines. Quite astonishing and yet, proof is in the glass. Full of heady aromatics all florals and wood spice with flavours of dark cherries, cherry compote, and poached rhubarb, but it's not at all fruity as it also comes with a hint of charred radicchio and Italian-bitter herbs. There's an energy across the just medium-bodied palate, a little sinewy yet savoury through and through with the fine, and plentiful, tannins taking charge as it finishes long and convincingly. JF 14% alc.

Unique 12-kilogram-capacity picking crates ensure the integrity of the fruit, which arrives without any compacting and goes straight onto the sorting table. If need be, the fruit, still in the crates, can go into the cool room and within two hours be chilled to 10 degrees. A state-of-the-art crate washer (loved by the workers) ensures the containers are clean and ready for the next day's pick. Aside from the barrel room, the winery is dotted with Nico Velo concrete Tulipe tanks (Sandro is the Australian importer) three volumes at 4.7 hectolitres, 3.7 and 2.1. Apart from adding to the wine's character, for the pinot ferments it ensures uniform temperature thanks to the round bottom while the narrow top means a thicker cap of grape solids, which can also remain longer, and all this adds to a more even, better ferment. Chardonnay is barrel fermented but the finished wine in '23 went back into concrete before bottling.

ON A LATE autumn day, sitting in the unfinished tasting room, Sandro, Liz, as she's better known, and Tony, are about to taste the inaugural wines for the first time – the pinot noir bottled the day before, the chardonnay a week earlier. Moment of truth. The joy and relief palpable yet something more profound, too: it's respect. Fruit off four-year-old vines tasting this complex, detailed and beautiful. It's a wow moment.

"I've never seen this level of detail, concentration and layering of flavour in such young fruit in any wine I've ever made or been involved with," says Sandro, which, to date, covers a 30-plus-year career.

While vintage '24 is still coming together, he has identified unique qualities of disparate parcels, which bodes well as the aim is to make two estate wines with fruit from across the vineyard plus single block bottlings.

While cautious and ever questioning, as there's a long way to go, Sandro says: "These wines are like brother and sister; you can tell they come from the same place. I like that and I'm very happy with the way they have turned out." ●

