

# Mudgee Magic

*Robert Oatley's new  
Australian venture is a winner.*

GERALD D. BOYD



From left: Winemakers James Manners, Chris Hancock, and Larry Cherubino



**M**udgee is a fun name to say and you don't even have to know that Mudgee is a small town, west of Sydney in New South Wales, Australia, to enjoy letting the name roll off your tongue ... Mud-gee!

The Aborigines knew Mudgee as the "Nest in the Hills," not exactly a name that conjures up the same wine visions as Bordeaux, Burgundy or even Barossa. Fact is, although a few German families worked vineyards in Mudgee starting in the late 19th century, it wasn't until the 1960s that an unfolding renaissance breathed new life into the region. Later still Mudgee began to move out of the shadow of neighboring Hunter Valley when Orlando Wyndham left Hunter for its new Montrose-Mudgee winery and then in 1997, Rosemount released its Mountain Blue Mudgee wines.

The fact that Mudgee grapes had arrived was not lost on Robert Oatley, then owner of Rosemount Estate in the upper Hunter Valley. Oatley, Chris Hancock and winemaker Philip Shaw were a winning combination at Rosemount, bringing grapes in from different regions then releasing one noteworthy wine after another: Mountain Blue Shiraz Cabernet, McLaren Vale (South Australia) Balmoral Syrah and Yarra Valley (Victoria) Chardonnay, to name a few. But eventually all things come to an end, even good ones.

In 2001, Oatley sold Rosemount to Southcorp, a decision that was difficult at the time. Hancock, an integral part of the

business, took ill and as he later revealed, "I had a fairly dire prognosis." But the new partnership with Southcorp wasn't working, so Oatley sold his shares in Southcorp to Fosters, and Hancock stayed on as a consultant. After one year, Hancock left to rejoin Oatley to start up a new wine business.

When Oatley parted company with Southcorp, some vineyards he owned in Mudgee were retained, a move that would be the key to the future of Robert Oatley Vineyards. Oatley presently owns 1,300 acres of vineyards in the western foothills of the Blue Mountains, rooted in ancient volcanic soils and sheltered from coastal rains by the Blue Mountains. Oatley also buys grapes from other Mudgee growers, as well as from growers in Adelaide Hills, South Australia, Alpine Valley and Mornington Peninsula, Victoria and Margaret River, Pemberton and Great Southern in Western Australia (WA).

Buying grapes in Western Australia when your winery is in Mudgee is like having vineyards in New York's Finger Lakes district and a winery in California's Santa Barbara County. So how does Robert Oatley Vineyards handle the logistics? "All of the reds (except our very best) are fermented on the skins in WA and brought over as wine for barrel maturation and to be finished in Mudgee. Our very best red and white wines are made and matured, while our other whites are transported as chilled juice in insulated tankers, fermented and finished in Mudgee." What you might call long distance winemaking.

Group photo: © JACK ATLEY/OATLEY WINES

## CONTRIBUTORS

At the top end of the Robert Oatley line are five varietals in the limited production tier, sometimes called “Gold Band” wines for the gold stripe across the newly designed labels. Riesling is one of the top-end wines, sourced from the Great Southern, a vast region as far south and west as one can go in Australia. Although Great Southern Riesling is not as well known as Rieslings from the Claire Valley, Eden Valley and Adelaide Hills in South Australia, Chris Hancock says that’s just fine. Contrary to other thinking in the international wine market, though, Hancock doesn’t see a promising future for Riesling.

“You know, Riesling has to be one of the great disappointments. Good Riesling is such a great summer wine which can (sometimes) become quite interesting with age. Yet, despite all the talk and wishing amongst the cognoscenti it has still not caught the imagination of the public. Somehow I fear it will always remain somewhat of a niche variety with occasional boosts of temporary popularity. We have no plans for [a Riesling] from any other region than Great Southern,” says Hancock with finality.

One thing Hancock is enthusiastic about is Robert Oatley’s high-profile consulting winemaker. Larry Cherubino started working with James Manners and the Oatley team in 2008 and now devotes most of his time to Robert Oatley Vineyards while still working with his family wine. One of the Cherubino’s tasks is to source grapes for Oatley wines, including a Shiraz from the Alpine Valley in Northeast Victoria and a second Shiraz from a single vineyard in the Great Southern of Western Australia. Both wines are slated for release in the near future and will be available in small quantities in the U.S. market.

Cherubino’s impact has moved Robert Oatley wines to a new level, prompting Hancock to say that Oatley wines don’t overpower or clash with food, like some wines he’s tasted. “We see wine as an accompaniment for food. This is not an uncommon concept, but I do think that mistakes have been made by some winemakers and wine critics

in promoting wines which have higher initial impact but are fundamentally unsuited to food. Two examples would be California Chardonnays of the late 1970s and 1980s and Australian Shiraz from the late 1990s onwards.”

While mistakes made in promoting certain wines by winemakers and wine critics are possible roadblocks to the ultimate purpose of wine, to be compatible with food, other factors like unseasonable weather are harder to cope with. A long drought and recent damaging storms and resulting floods impacted parts of Australia, including Mudjee. Hancock says that Mudjee experienced some early season mildew in 2010, as a result of the heavy storms, but he notes that some of the worst flooding was in central and northwest Victoria. “However, the heavy storms did break the eight-year drought across the country. One important outcome of the drought is that politicians and farmers alike are now aware that water has a value, with only the efficient grower and farmer surviving over the long term.”

In recent years Australia has been successful, with a few set backs, at gaining a toe hold in the U.S. market. But Hancock believes some pressing problems linger and that the industry needs to re-invent itself. “It is becoming increasingly apparent that Australia cannot afford to be a producer of commodity wine. The price that will be placed on water and the tyranny of distance are key factors as we face the future. This is a very large country chronically short of water and probably set to suffer dearly from the impact of climate change. These matters combined with the distances from major markets by themselves should be enough to eliminate us from the commodity category.”

Still, Hancock keeps a positive outlook, especially for Robert Oatley wines, believing that as the global economy improves, wine surpluses will shrink and people will spend more on wine, thus restoring balance in the marketplace. And that has to be good for all wine consumers, especially those with a taste for Australian wines.

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## THE WINES



The first five Robert Oatley wines are limited production “Gold Band” varieties, with screw cap closures, followed by three wines in the middle tier of Robert Oatley wines.

- **2009 ROBERT OATLEY CHARDONNAY, Mudgee, New South Wales, Australia, \$23.** Grapes for this bright, mineral-laced Chardonnay are from 40-year-old vines. The grapes were picked cool and pressed into French oak hogsheads, followed by a wild-yeast ferment, with no malolactic and minimum lees stirring. The result of all this contemporary processing is a Chardonnay showing a bright light golden color, ripe stone fruit aromas with a hint of toasted oak, crisp medium flavors of mineral and citrus with a subtle peachy back note. A moderate 13.5% alcohol and minimum oak puts this Chardonnay squarely in the style of more fresh fruit and less oak.
- **2010 ROBERT OATLEY RIESLING, Great Southern, Western Australia, \$23.** This crisp mouth-watering Riesling traveled far, from vineyard to bottle, starting in Western Australia where the grapes were gathered in the cool-climate Great Southern, tank fermented and bottled in Margaret River, then shipped across the country to Mudgee. The bright color is pale gold, while the low intensity aromatics show hints of jasmine and tropical fruit. It's dry, with crisp mouth-watering acidity and a long steely finish. After tasting this mouth-watering wine, it remains a mystery to me why Riesling is not appreciated more.
- **2010 ROBERT OATLEY GEWÜRZTRAMINER, Mudgee, New South Wales, Australia, \$23.** Grapes for this juicy Gewürz were picked at three successive intervals to progressively add more flavor and different levels of acidity. Cool fermentation was carried out in stainless steel giving the wine an attractive exotic aroma of spices and lichee. It has great texture and fruit and finishes dry with good length and structure. Drink this enticing lively wine now while the fruit is fresh.
- **2009 ROBERT OATLEY PINOT NOIR, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia, \$30.** The Mornington Peninsula, a vital rural enclave not far from Melbourne, is one of Australia's most promising areas for Pinot Noir. The wine has a characteristic Pinot light-medium ruby color, forward spice and black cherry aromatics with a hint of oak. Aged for 10 months in French oak, it is dry with medium fruit and a subtle gamy note. The finish is dry with medium fruit and trace of boysenberry.
- **2008 ROBERT OATLEY CABERNET SAUVIGNON, Margaret River, Western Australia, \$30.** Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon is noted for subtle floral notes, refined tannins and texture like that of dark chocolate melting in the mouth. This 100% Cabernet was aged 18 months in French oak. The color is a deep purple-ruby, while the nose is slightly closed but showing some dark fruits, spicy French oak and hints of vanilla. It has nicely textured choco-berry flavors and good length through the finish. With a few more years of bottle aging, this lovely Cabernet will reward the patient for an additional six to eight years.
- **2010 ROBERT OATLEY SAUVIGNON BLANC, Pemberton, Western Australia, \$17.** Aussie wineries got behind the power curve on Sauvignon Blanc but they are catching up fast, noted by this bright and crisp Sauvignon. Tank fermented, the pure Sauvignon fruit comes through with a very pale gold color, passion fruit aromatics and crisp tropical fruit and lime juice flavors. Enjoy this Sauvignon as an aperitif or with light foods.
- **2008 ROBERT OATLEY CHARDONNAY, Mudgee, New South Wales, Australia, \$17.** Made from 100% Mudgee-grown grapes, a portion of this mid-tier Chardonnay was aged for 10 months in French oak barrels. It has a brilliant light gold color, forward citrus juice and mineral nose and flavors. Textured with crisp acidity, citrus peel and subtle hints of tropical fruit, it has length and plenty of fruit.
- **2009 ROBERT OATLEY TEMPRANILLO, King Valley, Victoria, Australia, \$20.** King Valley, in northeast Victoria, is home to Australia's first plantings of Tempranillo, the Spanish red grape that is attracting worldwide attention. Aged for 12 months in French oak barrels, this Tempranillo has a lovely deep purple-ruby color, while the nose is slightly closed but showing bright raspberry notes. Medium fruit, good texture, refined tannins and no heat in the long finish are notable attributes of this fruity wine. ☞