Coonawarra & Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon

Australia’s prime Cabernet regions are vastly different in size, soil and climate. So too are the resulting wine styles, which cater for all tastes, says Sarah Ahmed.

COONAWARRA AND MARGARET River are Australia’s leading Cabernet Sauvignon regions, but which rules the roost? A run of impressive vintages since 2007 consolidated Margaret River’s reputation for consistency but Coonawarra has upped its game since a fresh influx of labour enabled this remote South Australian region to restructure vineyards and undertake more operations by hand. Fruit quality has never been better, intensifying the rivalry.

Though Cabernet was planted when the region was founded by John Riddoch in 1890, Coonawarra didn’t find its feet for 60 years. Some 400km south of Adelaide, its remoteness affected labour and sales. The tide turned in 1946 when the original Riddoch cellars were bought first by Woodleys, then Samuel Wynn & Co. Now known as Wynns, this estate owns 70% of all vineyards planted on Coonawarra’s well-drained, terra rossa soils (clay/loam over limestone) – the intensely planted strip of terra rossa is only 12km long and 2km wide. By the 1960s the mint-choc style of Coonawarra Cabernet was famous.

Margaret River’s focus on Cabernet was influenced by agronomist Dr John Gladstones’ 1965 and 1966 reports. Due to its maritime climate and well-drained ironstone gravel soils, he compared the Western Australian region to Bordeaux’s Right Bank in a good vintage (given Margaret River’s drier conditions), Regional pioneers (Cullen, Vasse Felix, Cape Mentelle and Moss Wood) never looked back and their authoritative wines have stood the test of time.

Margaret River’s mild maritime conditions are key to its consistency. Ocean breezes mean that, unlike in Coonawarra (100km inland), there’s little risk of frost, while extended Indian summers increase ripening potential. This accounts for an elegant balance, even when young – wines have a sweet core of fruit, acidity is fresh but integrated and, depending on location, tannins range from silky to sinewy.

North around Yallingup produces robust, structured reds. Central and warmer, Wilyabrup is renowned for generous, powerful wines of Paullilac-like stature and richness. Wines from the cooler south (between Margaret River and Karridale) are sinewy, with bramble and herbaceous notes. Top wines from these coastal areas on the ridge develop a wonderful, gravelly minerality and can last 20 to 30 years.

Coonawarra is cooler than Margaret River. Greater continentality results in diurnal temperature extremes, producing dense, dark-fruited wines with assertive, ripe tannin and acidity. Slight variations of soil type, depth and climate yield stylistic differences. The region’s classic, minty quality is attributed to the more elevated, sandier sites on the east, while wines from the cooler microclimate to the south have a red fruit bias. Top wines, which can age 30 years plus, readily mop up new oak. Sometimes austere in their youth, over time tannins mellow, and mint, chocolate, black olive, leather and earth notes develop.

Known as The Wine Detective (www.thewinedetective.co.uk), Sarah Ahmed is a wine writer and educator.
**The results**

An impressive tasting to say the least, with our judges seduced by Western elegance, particularly in the younger wines, as well as savvy, mature Cabernets from South Australia. Tina Gellie reports

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“There’s nowhere else in the world that does Cabernet like this – except Bordeaux.”

**Roger Jones**

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The wines from Coonawarra and Margaret River were a joy to taste. The younger wines, as well as by savoury, mature Cabernets from South Australia. Tina Gellie reports

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"There were some really stunning wines in the competition, but the seamless quality and class of Australian Cabernet Sauvignon is extraordinary. It was a great vintage, and the wines were a joy to taste. The younger wines, as well as by savoury, mature Cabernets from South Australia. Tina Gellie reports

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Taste: 94%

Texture: 92%

Value: 94%

Balance: 95%

Overall: 95%

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Texture: 92%

Value: 94%

Balance: 95%

Overall: 95%
Outstanding (continued)

Night Harvest, John George, Margaret River 2010

**Drink 2012–2018**

**18.75 (95)** RJ PM AR

**£25** The Wine Society

Twenty-six years is a long time in Margaret River viticulture, and Andy and Mandy Ferreira have been involved in the establishment of some 3,000 hectares of vineyards in the region over this time. Contract harvesting at night remains a large part of their business, hence the name of their brand. They have produced their own wines since 2005, employing contract winemakers Kevin McKay of Forestier Estate, who has grown and made wine in Margaret River since the Ferreiras first arrived, and Bruce Dukes, one of the state’s most respected contract winemakers, and recipient of Western Australia’s Winemaker of the Year Award last year.

RJ Cassis fruit nose and soft tannins – quite confected, but as it opens up the finesse and purity really comes through to show a real gem of a wine. Lovely savoury overtones and the finish is very clean and fresh.

PM Beautifully scented, fine nose, plum, minty freshness, toasty new oak too. Round, rich palate, very classy new oak, fresh black fruit, really ripe tannins, long superb finish. A delicious, classy and harmonious style.

AR Attractively sweet cassis and mulberry fragrance. Lively succulent palate of textured cassis fruit with an attractive purity of flavour and a fine cushion of supple tannins, a hint of chocolate and coconut oak, and savoury balancing acidity. Superb.

Drink 2012–2030 Alc 15.2%

Penfolds, Bin 169, Coonawarra 2008

**Drink 2012–2022**

**18.75 (95+)** RJ PM AR

**£165** Berry Bros & Rudd, Slove

Penfolds upholds a mantra to maintain the style of its classic wines in spite of the ever-changing winds of popular preference. For this reason, when single sub-region and French oak became the catchcries of the Barossa, rather than meddling with the multi-region, US oak recipe of Grange, RWT was born. In precisely the same manner, the single-region, French-oak Bin 169 has recently been introduced alongside Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon. From two prized Penfolds Coonawarra vineyards, this inaugural vintage arises from a season of refined and powerful Cabernet Sauvignon.

RJ Toasty, aromatic nose with jam conserve nuances. Very delicate flours, hints of vanilla and berries and autumnal wild flowers, some violets too. Good tannin structure to allow it to age gracefully for a very long time. Of course it can be drunk sooner, but please wait.

PM Deep, elegant, sophisticated nose, lovely cedar fruit. Fine yet powerful palate, chewy ripe tannins and a big, bold finish – long, flashy fruit. A successful blockbuster style that leaves you impressed.

AR Nice liqueuric, black cherry, toasty oak and cola-spice aroma. Fine fruit concentration, opulent cassis and blackberry richness. Nicely tailed up with acidity to keep it fresh, bringing necessary brightness and balance.

Drink 2012–2018 Alc 14.5%

Arlewood, Margaret River 2007

**Drink 2012–2024**

**18.5 (95)** RJ PM AR

**£27** Amathus, Food & Fine Wine, Wine Treasury

Big changes are afoot at Arlewood. In mid-2007, the estate sold its 1988 planted Willyabrup vineyard to Vasco Felix, acquiring a new vineyard south of the Margaret River township two years later. The estate’s 2007 wines were harvested prior to these changes. The ripe Cabernet of this warm season from a single block in the estate vineyard was matured for two years in half new and half second-use French oak. Just 700 dozen bottles were produced of the final wine of this era for Arlewood.

RJ Elegant, mocha, wild berry and earthy nose. Delicate savoury fruit palate controlled by tannin calling out for a spit roast lamb to go with it. Still some tannin so this will age gracefully for many years.

PM Very deep, surprisingly youthful appearance despite its age. Ripe, intense and upfront nose, blackberry fruit. Full, layered palate, huge flavour. Wow, this is impressive: ripe, soft tannins, immense power and balance.

AR Lovely, spoulent, dark berry fruit succulence framed by bright, fresh acidity and nicely rounded by subtle oak; a stylish Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon with all of its ducks in a row. Five years old, going strong, beautifully balanced, tension between fruit sweetness, savoury acidity and fine-grained texture and with plenty of life ahead of it.

Drink 2012–2035 Alc 14.5%

Leeuwin Estate, Art Series, Margaret River 2008

**Drink 2012–2022**

**18.5 (95)** RJ PM AR

**£33–£37** Domaine Direct, Secret Cellar, WoodWinters

No Cabernet in Margaret River has been more dramatically transformed over the past decade than this. Once a style of clunky oak, assertive tannins and high-harvest ripeness, a complete makeover in the vineyards has produced more even ripeness and permitted earlier harvesting to capture the hallmarks of the variety, elevating this wine to its rightful position alongside the estate’s famous Art Series Chardonnay. Leeuwin’s Art Series philosophy is to represent its finest, most age-worthy wines, and its Cabernet now confidently meets this brief.

RJ Fresh sea breeze nose. Liquorice and a lovely intensity of berries, dried raspberries and vanilla. Lovely, young vibrancy to this, which gives a perfect texture in the mouth and long aftertaste. Happy to drink this now, but it will age; the fruit keeps coming back and tantalising my taste buds.

PM Deep and bright. Lovely purity and freshness, elegant tannins. Flies, sweet fruit, beautifully balanced and fine, subtle, understated yet intense, and highly drinkable. A very classy style.

AR Leafy aroma moderated by astutely judged vanilla oak adds roundness and a degree of complexity to the juicy cassis fruit flavours which are etched with bright acidity in almost Bordeaux cru classé mode. Excellent.

Drink 2012–2022 Alc 13%
Coonawarra & Margaret River Cabernets

Outstanding (continued) 18.5–20pts (95–100pts)

Lenton Brae, Wilyabrup, Margaret River 2009
18.5 (95) RJ 18.5 PM 18.5 AR 18.5
N/A UK www.lentonbrae.com
Bruce Tomlinson’s 1982 estate is in the skilful hands of winemaker son Edward, who crafts a set of wines of ever-finer precision and purity. To this end, a sorting table was introduced in 2006, and cane pruning was initiated in the vineyard in 2007 so as to create, in his words, ‘richer, riper and less angular and austere fruit flavours’. His flagship Cabernet is a barrel selection of estate-grown fruit (tweaked with a little Merlot and a drop of Petit Verdot) from original, 1982-planted estate Wilyabrup vines.

RJ Perfumed fruit nose and a lovely herbaceous palate with golden plums, just toasted, with a touch of crème brûlée. This has savoury, spice and fruit, is balanced and very fine which will age gracefully. On my list to buy.


AR Sweetly fragrant blackcurrant and raspberry fruit; intense, juicy, dark mulberry and loganberry palate with a fine blade of acidity supporting the fruit freshness and a lovely succulent texture. Crowd-pleasing and classic. Drink 2012–2035 Alc 14%

Highly Recommended 17–18.25pts (90–94pts)

Fraser Gallop, Parterre, Wilyabrup, Margaret River 2010
18 (93) RJ 18 PM 17.5 AR 18.5
£32.99 Berkmann Wine Cellars, Markinch Wine Gallery, Wine Direct, Wine Library

Koonara, Ezra’s Gift, Coonawarra 2010
18 (93) RJ 18 PM 18.5 AR 17.5
N/A UK www.koonara.com
Fine, smoky nose with bright red berry fruit and powerfully spicy liquorice and dark berry lift. Cinnamon, nutmeg and oregano on the palate, with an intense cassis and black cherry fruit richness, infused with exotic spices and a bright herbal undertone. Drink 2012–2025 Alc 14.2%

Butler Crest, Margaret River 2010
17.75 (92) RJ 18 PM 17 AR 18
N/A UK www.greenpiper.com.au
Surprisingly complex, savoury nose - earthy with real character. Rich and long, lingering fruit, jumping out in delicate waves; blueberries and loganberries. Almost Bordelais in style albeit with a tad more power and sweetness of fruit. Drink 2012–2035 Alc 15.7%

Di Giorgio Family, Coonawarra 2008
17.75 (92) RJ 18.5 PM 17.5 AR 17
N/A UK www.digiorgio.com.au
Soft leather, spice and liquorice with powerfully rich, sweet, cherry, coconut oak overlying blackberry. Full, gutsy palate with intense black fruit. Balance between oak and fruit is clever, offering a wine ready to drink now but will improve. Drink 2012–2025. Alc 14%

Evans & Tate, Redbrook, Margaret River 2009
17.75 (92) RJ 18 PM 18 AR 18.5
POA PLB
Attractive cassia fragrance with a touch of dried mint, leathery fruit, hints of cedar and mocha. Dense and layered, lots of flavour, grainy fine tannins; evolves in the mouth leaving tiny traces of various berries and plum fruits. Excellent. Drink 2012–2025 Alc 14%

Hollick, Ravenswood, Coonawarra 2008
17.75 (92) RJ 18.5 PM 18 AR 17
£39.50 Fortnum & Mason, Great Grog
Rich, sweet mulberry jam and plums on the nose. Lovely, meaty flavour with violets and mulberries in the background. A lovely, intense, brooding wine which is evolving, leading to an earthy, mocha finish. Drink 2012–2019 Alc 14%

‘Coonawarra was certainly singing, but Margaret River stole the show here’ Pierre Mansour
Highly Recommended (continued)

Katnook Estate, Coonawarra 2009
17.5% (92) RJ 18 PM 17 AR 17.5
£18.99

Patrick of Coonawarra, Home Block, Coonawarra 2008 17.5% (92)
RJ 18 PM 17 AR 18
N/A UK www.patrickofcoonawarra.com

Resche, Empyrean, Coonawarra 2004 17.5% (92) RJ 17.5 PM 18 AR 17.5
N/A UK www.reschewines.com

Umam, Margaret River 2008
17.5% (92) RJ 18 PM 18 AR 17
£35–£40

Yalumba, The Menzies, Coonawarra 2005 17.5% (92) RJ 16 PM 18 AR 17
£26.99

Cape Mentelle, Margaret River 2010 17.5% (93) RJ 16.5 PM 18 AR 17
£30.99

Jim Barry, The First Eleven, Coonawarra 2005 17.5% (91) RJ 16.5 PM 18 AR 16
£29.99

Celestial Bay, Margaret River 2010
17.25% (93) RJ 18 PM 17 AR 15.5
£30.99

Hay Shed Hill, Margaret River 2009
17.25% (90) RJ 18 PM 16.5 AR 17
£16.95

Heydon Estate, WG Grace, Wilyabrup, Margaret River 2007
17.25% (90) RJ 16 PM 16 AR 17
£29.99

Wolf Blass Wines, Gold Label, Coonawarra 2008 17.5% (91) RJ 16 PM 18 AR 18
£15.50

Wynns Coonawarra Estate, Black Label, Coonawarra 2010 17.5% (91)
RJ 17.5 PM 18 AR 16.5
POA

Swings & Roundabouts, Margaret River 2010 17.5% (91) RJ 17.5 PM 17 AR 18
N/A UK www.swings.com.au

Yalumba, The Menzies, Coonawarra 2010 17.5% (91) RJ 18 PM 18 AR 17
£30.99

Winns Coonawarra Estate, The Siding, Coonawarra 2010
17.5% (91) RJ 16 PM 18 AR 17
£29.99

Poetry on First Taste, then a lovely savoury nuance comes through. Lovely, juicy, succulent texture and yet incredibly fresh. Just starting to hit its stride and will age easily. Excellent crafting in the cellar. Drink 2012–2042. 14.9%
Highly Recommended (continued)

17-18 pts (90-94 pts)

**Wynns Coonawarra Estate, Genglly, Single Vineyard, Coonawarra 2009 17.25 (90+)* RJ 17.5 PM £17.15**

Chocolaty, spicy, ripe blackberries and blackcurrants. Aromas are complex and deep, with notes of plum and violets. The palate is rich, ripe, and balanced, with velvety tannins and a long, smooth finish. Drink 2012-2035. 14.5% Alc

**Rosabrook, Single Vineyard Estate, Margaret River 2010 17.25 (90+)* RJ 18.5 PM £19.99**

Mocha nose with ripe, dark cherry fruit and hints of cocoa and chocolate. The palate is powerful and complex, with notes of blackberry, chocolate, and spice. A long, velvety finish. Drink 2012-2025. 14.8% Alc

**Capel Vale Wines, Regional Series, Margaret River 2010 17 (90) RJ 18 PM £16.5**

Floral scents of red fruits on the nose, with hints of cinnamon and vanilla. The palate is rich, complex, and balanced, with velvety tannins and a long finish. Drink 2012-2035. 14% Alc

**Juniper Estate, Margaret River 2008 17 (90) RJ 16.5 PM £15.90**

Ardenza Cellar & Kitchen

Lovely, seductive cola-spyce aromas lead to a generous palate of succulent cassis and blackberry fruit that’s stiched with liquorice and spice with well-crafted background oak. Substantial style. Drink 2012-2020. 14.5% Alc
### Expert summary: Anthony Rose

Coonawarra may be ahead of Margaret River in terms of history and tradition, but it was the West that won in this exceptional line-up of Cabernet Sauvignons.

WITH SEVEN WINES scoring 18.5/20 points (95/100) and above, and 42 earning no less than 17 points (90), this was an exceptional line-up. Margaret River had the edge over Coonawarra, but the latter was by no means disgraced.

Two of the top seven Cabernets were from Coonawarra, as were 18 of the 42 Highly Recommended wines. Given that its modern wine era begins in the early 1950s, South Australia's prime Cabernet region has an advantage over Margaret River for history and tradition. This partly explains the dominance of big company names such as Penfolds, Wynns and Yalumba, hence more of a house style.

Broadly speaking, Coonawarra Cab's show generous, concentrated cassis richness accompanied by elegant tannins and polished oak with occasional edgy acidity. Most vintages entered were 2010, 2009 and 2008, but there were a handful going back to 2004. And as the results showed, when they're good, they age beautifully.

Margaret River, on the other hand, was founded in the late 1960s by pioneering professionals, and the smaller-grover ethos has been maintained. Names like Cape Mentelle, Leeuwin and Moss Wood – the latter a poor showing here (15.75/85+) – are well known, but it was encouraging to see so many new or newish names: Night Harvest, Arlewood, Fraser Gallop, Uramu, Lenton Brae, Fermoy, Peccavi and Swings & Roundabouts. Margaret River’s small-grower ethos gives it the edge when it comes to individuality, and the style is often closer to Bordeaux with that effortlessly leafy elegance and restraint underscored by subtle oak treatment.

While the best Australian locations for Shiraz are now firmly established, it’s interesting to remember that when Max Schubert pioneered Grange in the early 1950s, he used Shiraz for Penfolds’ top wine because there was insufficient Cabernet. And Margaret River wasn’t even a twinkle in the Cullen and Moss Wood eye...

Leaving aside occasional pockets of Cabernet excellence such as Eden Valley and Yarra Valley, this tasting showed that Margaret River and Coonawarra are Australia’s prime Cabernet Sauvignon regions. The tussle for long-term domination may be inconclusive given that preferences will be subject to factors such as vintage variation, style differences and personal taste, but the rivalry between them will ensure that there will always be much to talk about and enjoy.

‘Margaret River had the edge over Coonawarra, but the latter was by no means disgraced’

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**My top three**

**Roger Jones**

- **Fermoy Estate, Reserve, Margaret River 2010** To me the best wine of the tasting – an explosion of intense fruit, perfectly balanced with exotic toasty oak. For such a young wine it’s already showing much more restrained than those of a decade ago, allowing the fruit to tantalise the palate, with great freshness from the sea breezes that come over the vines.

  - 18.5 pts/20 (95pts/100) Drink 2012-2025

- **Leeuwin Estate, Art Series, Margaret River 2008** Leeuwin continues to hit exceptional clarity and these wines are much more restrained than those of a decade ago, allowing the fruit to tantalise the palate, with great freshness from the sea breezes that come over the vines.

  - 18pts/20 (95pts/100) Drink 2012-2022

- **Yalumba, The Menzies, Coonawarra 2005** This wine shows the whole ethos of the Yalumba stable, delivering a wine ripe for drinking now but that will evolve over many years. It cries out for roast lamb, to go with the deep, velvety anise palate.

  - 18pts/20 (95pts/100) Drink 2012-2050

**Pierre Mansour**

- **Leeuwin Estate, Art Series, Margaret River 2008** Since 2004 I have been watching the improvements winemaker Paul Atwood has made with this Cabernet. The 2008 is a very fine example and definitely announces Leeuwin’s arrival on Margaret River’s fine red wine scene.

  - 18.5pts/20 (95pts/100) Drink 2012-2022

- **Night Harvest, John George, Margaret River 2010** The perfect handling of new oak enhances, not dominates, the fresh, perfumed, intense fruit. Night Harvest was a discovery for me at this tasting – and so good that I bought some for Wine Society members.

  - 18.5 (95) Drink 2012-2030

- **Cape Mentelle, Margaret River 2010** This is a modern, polished wine which has all the ingredients to age magnificently. The big, ripe, tannic muscle is supported by layers of black fruit. Give this two years and I reckon it would gain another two points on my score.

  - 16.5 (88) Drink 2013-2020

**Anthony Rose**

- **Fermoy Estate, Reserve, Margaret River 2010** Just south of the Margaret River township, Arlewood makes a stylish, pure Cabernet Sauvignon whose concentration of fruit and maturation in French oak have given it terrific legs and a particularly attractive balance between fruit sweetness, texture and beautiful, savoury acidity.

  - 18.5 (95) Drink 2012-2035

- **Arlewood, Margaret River 2007** Adjacent to Moss Wood, close to the Indian Ocean, Arlewood must be better known for this elegant Bordeaux-style Wilyabrup Cabernet Sauvignon, whose black and red fruit flavours are nicely complemented by a wisp of oak and velvet-textured succulence.

  - 18.5pts/20 (95pts/100) Drink 2012-2035

- **Penfolds, Bin 169, Coonawarra 2008** Thanks to more A-grade fruit in Coonawarra, Penfolds launched its first Bin 169 this year without detracting from the famous Bin 707. The result is a quite superb combination of liquorice and cola-spiced, black cherry fruit overlaid by toasty oak.

  - 19 (96) Drink 2012-2018

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**NB:** the tasters’ top wines are not necessarily their top-scoring, rather those which, on learning the wines’ identity, they feel are the most notable given their provenance, price or other factors.