



Money where his mouth is

Jeni Port meets the controversial figure behind our most expensive red.

DAVE Powell pleads ignorance. He didn't know he was selling Australia's most expensive current-release red wine until he read about it in the papers.

At \$700 a bottle, his Torbreck the Laird 2005 shiraz from the Barossa Valley outguns the Penfolds 2005 Grange (\$600) and the Henschke 2005 Hill of Grace (\$610).

The wine, Powell says, was almost all sold before the media got wind of it, so he can't be accused of pursuing some cynical marketing plan.

It's probably one of the few things he can't be accused of, Lord knows he's copped a fair bit.

The big man wears both his passions and his prejudices loudly, often accompanied by a torrent of expletives.

At a recent Melbourne tasting of the Torbreck new-release wines for spring — but, alas, not including the Laird — the air turned blue with his favourite adjective.

A question about the popular move away from high-alcohol wines was followed by a passionate reply:

"I'm so f---ing sick of it. To arbitrarily say we want a wine at 14 per cent alcohol is ridiculous. I don't find out what alcohols my wines are until we do the test for the bottle label.

It can be three years after a wine is made before I find out the alcohol. I couldn't care less.

"I don't care what the sugar levels are. I pick on taste."

You can see why Powell has both his admirers and his detractors.

The detractors are those who inhabit wine industry bodies such as the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation and big Australian wine companies run by shareholders. He says he's Public Enemy No. 1 with them because he speaks his mind about the parlous state of the industry.

Certainly, the people at Penfolds must have ears burning when Powell is venting, which is often.

His admirers look beyond the bluster. They acknowledge a small



Dave Powell savours the bouquet of his Torbreck the Laird 2005 shiraz (below).

winemaker done good on the world stage. Australia needs more of them.

In the new order that Australian winemakers are being asked to join — one that no longer concentrates on cheap and friendly but strives for a sense of place and quality — Powell stands tall.

His wines are supremely expressive of where they come from. It's highly debatable whether they could come from anywhere else, really. That place is the Barossa Valley.

Powell went there two decades ago. His mentors were people such as Robert "Rocky" O'Callaghan at Rockford Wines, a winemaker of the old school, literally, with his ancient basket presses and sense of pride in Barossan history. The new chun was smitten.

Old-vine shiraz, grenache and mataro would form the basis of what Powell refers to as grassroots winemaking.

It's a seductive marketing tool. It's why he can continue

making wines that, on paper, are less than popular, such as Barossa Valley semillon. There's no good reason it should still be around, except that producers such as Torbreck and Peter Lehmann Wines believe in it and like to drink it.

The Torbreck 2009 semillon is full-bodied and dripping in honey-suckle and citrus blossom, with a striking juicy fruit finish. It's old-vine with some age in oak barriques. That's a lot of work for such a modest wine.

The entry point for most drinkers new to Torbreck is Cuvee Juveniles, originally made for the Paris wine-bar scene. The grenache, shiraz and mataro blend is sourced from 34 vineyards with an average age of 90 years.

It's an impressive provenance and to think for all that, the wine never sees a lick of oak and sells for \$25 a bottle.

Vibrant and exciting, the complex fruit flavours ring through like a bell. "The 2009

year was the greatest vintage for grenache in the Barossa since I've been there," Powell says. The grape is certainly at its sweetest and most enticing.

Next comes The Steading. Ostensibly it's the same as Cuvee Juveniles. After fermentation, the wine is split, with half going to bottle at Juveniles and half going into old hogsheads as The Steading.

It is Powell's favourite. "It's one of the first wines I ever made," he says. The 2007 is earthy with grenache sweetness.

Powell has worked in wine in California, France, Spain and Italy. The European sensibility, the savouriness, the dryness and texture is evident in his winemaking.

"I work with Australian fruit but I have a European philosophy," he says.

The man is nothing if not paradoxical. The outspoken boldness of his personality is at odds with the elegance of his wines. And he can still surprise.

When Yarra Yering in the Yarra

Valley was put up for sale after the death of its founder, Dr Bailey Carrodus, Powell was an early suitor. He wasn't successful. Pity. It would have been interesting to see what he would have done; he professes great admiration for Carrodus and the style of red wine he made.

Both men believed strongly in the Rhone Valley style, with Carrodus pursuing shiraz and viognier and Powell exploring the full range of Rhone grapes from both the north and south.

The Woodcutter's shiraz is Torbreck's "bread and butter", a wine made in volume. The '09 is firm and spicy with a touch of stalky herbals.

If the Barossa fulfils Powell's push for solid power, the Eden Valley reveals a more delicate side.

The Struie is mostly Eden Valley fruit. You can see it in the lifted aromatics and floral lift. Combined with the bigness of Barossa fruit, the Struie is a sturdy wine.

"Eden Valley fruit is a great foil for Barossa fruit," Powell says. If only more producers recognised that.

The 2008 Gask shiraz, from a single vineyard, is Powell's "heroic" wine. It's hard to see why. The violets, the blueberries, the touch of

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aniseed are kind of cool-climate all over, with a firmish finish.

The Factor 2007 shiraz is all Barossa. Now that's a heroic wine. It's made in homage to the old vines and (old) growers of the Barossa. The tannins are almost scary.

Finally comes the 2007 RunRig. RunRig pays homage to the northern Rhone, with old-vine shiraz (average age 125 years) and a splash of viognier before bottling.

"It's amazing what 2 per cent to 3 per cent of viognier does to a wine," Powell says. "It becomes RunRig."

RunRig is the soul of Torbreck. But now there's another star, the Laird.

"I have no problem charging that money," Powell says of the \$700 price tag. "The wine has to stand up."

