

# The Advertiser

Lifestyle

## A complete PUZZLE

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Like the Rubik's cube on which he based his glass temple to wine, there are many parts to McLaren Vale's Chester Osborn

There's a wonderful sweeping view of McLaren Vale and the sea beyond from the top floor of Chester Osborn's madcap Cube, but the winemaker is instead pointing me to something much closer, a shadow that moves through the glass wall of the tasting bar.

"It's a naked woman," he says, "swimming through fermented white wine." Sure enough, there is the silhouette of a female swimmer in the altogether undulating from panel to panel. And, just as he says, when I look down from the top of the glass bar, there she is again, from above this time.

Why, though, Chester?

"Well, a naked woman is sexy and so is white wine." There's a lot of whys when it comes to the way this fourth-generation chief winemaker at d'Arenberg does things. He's unconventional and eccentric, from his penchant for bright outfits to the long curly locks that give him the look of an ageing rock star. He likes to meditate, sleeps comparatively little, chortles quite a lot, and reveals at one point that he has Asperger's, which puts him on the milder end of the autism spectrum.

But watch him in the winery, walking around the bubbling, gurgling vats of fermenting grape juice like a doctor on ward rounds – carefully checking temperatures, making notes on which need to be watched, issuing instructions – and it's all business. From someone who was judged an academic dud by his headmaster at Prince Alfred College and who himself wondered whether he'd ever get the hang of making great red wine, Osborn has become one of the most successful operators in the industry, a clever marketer and a winemaker admired by his peers. His naked woman is just a video image of course, and she's not swimming in fermenting grape juice. She's a symbol, at least in the Chester Osborn universe, of our relationship with wine.

For him, you sense, the question is never really why – it's why not? You've got a bar made from 115 TV screens, why wouldn't you have a naked woman? You've got a mind constantly spinning with ideas and invention, why wouldn't you spend \$15 million on a fantasy glass box that mixes a crazy art museum, lauded restaurant, wine tasting venue, and the assorted contents of your own unfettered imagination?

This weekend Osborn is in his element, with the 10-day Tasting Australia festival kicking off with a Surrealist Ball at his d'Arenberg Cube. Osborn is also the wine sponsor of the festival, at a time when there's renewed focus on South Australia's innovative food and drink culture.

The first time we meet is at an exhibition of art from the Helpmann Academy. He stands out from the Champagne sipping crowd, wearing a red and yellow shirt decorated with Mexican-themed Day of the Dead characters and a matching skeleton brooch. He's not wearing his belt buckle with three wise monkey skulls, he points out, which strikes me as a missed opportunity. His trousers are red, and so are his pointy, metal-tipped boots.

This night he's in the market for more art for his new Cube, and he's spotted some woven, organic sculptures that I reckon look like strange plants from the set of a 1960s sci-fi show. He laughs, but disagrees. In his

opinion they look like sperm, a symbol of life, and he's got just the spot for them in the art gallery he's created at the bottom of his expensive glass box.

Perhaps they'll go with his yeast display, because that's the life that makes the wine, he says. It also works on another level too – sex. "People drink the wine, have sex, and make babies," he explains.

There's the symbolism again. He's always making connections between one thing and another, especially if the other is wine. Take his labels, well known for outlandish names designed to "make them stand out more".

A good example is The Apotropaic Triskaidekaphobia Single Vineyard Shiraz. "So, apotropaic is warding off evil," Osborn explains. "And triskaidekaphobia is the fear of the number 13. But there's 13 acres of vines, so if you drink this bottle of wine you'll ward off the evil factor that comes from number 13." The biggest symbol of them all, though, is that large green and white monolith sitting on a McLaren Vale ridge, a project that he started planning 15 years ago. "The concept took me seconds," he says. "It took me 20 minutes to draw." The original plan was to have a building in the colonial style of the existing d'Arry's Veranda restaurant, but instead he decided it had to capture the winery's essence. "And I thought what is d'Arenberg's essence? And I thought we're quirky, we're different, our label names are a puzzle to work out – wine is a puzzle to work out. What's the most iconic puzzle? A Rubik's cube." So he changed the colours, drew it out on the table there and then, and built a model. He presented the model – which he still has, complete with little soldiers and police cars in the vineyard – to the company board of his father, uncle and sister. "They thought I was pretty crazy actually," he admits. "My uncle said 'well, if winemaking doesn't work out for you, then maybe model-making would.' I took it in a positive light." He didn't give up. When his father said it wouldn't be buildable, he suggested they find out. When a builder mate worked out some figures, he took them back to the board. Then his father said, "well, you'd never get planning permission". Chester suggested they try. In a year they had it.

The economic meltdown of 2007-08 intervened, scuttling plans to start work. About 80 per cent of the company's wine was being exported then, built on the back of a low Aussie dollar which made it cheap for overseas buyers. But when the dollar blew out to \$US1.10, exports became much less profitable. The company had also gone into debt to buy extra vineyards. But Osborn stuck with it. With a \$2m government grant to help The Cube went up, better for the delay thanks to improvements in glass technology.

So much for the outside. But what about the five floors inside? To understand that, we need a private tour. But when I arrive at the winery's offices early, Osborn is busy with some clients and his father is just heading out to the post office with the mail.

D'Arry Osborn, now 91, grew up as a kid in the Great Depression and has carried the lessons of thrift ever since. That's one reason he initially opposed this ostentatious mix of marvel and marketing, but he's come around.

"What do you think of it?" he asks as we walk squinting into the hot afternoon. I tell him it looks pretty impressive.

"Yeah," he nods. "It's better than I thought it would be." It's a mind-bending place. As you walk in, speakers play music generated by a nearby weather station. Once inside, the ground floor looks to have taken a trip on LSD with odd perspectives and strange devices, from a cow's horn and lie detector to peep shows and images too rude to mention.

The walls of one room are lined with plastic flowers and fruit where you can smell the different aromatics of wine; elsewhere a skeleton with a trombone is balanced on scales against the ancient head of a Sumatran tiger.

Who thought of that? "I did," Chester says. "I pretty much thought of everything everywhere." Up we go. The toilets, wavy walls of plastic green hedges, don't escape. The men's urinals are leering faces of bizarre characters from wine labels. Outside, there's a self-portrait he made from 6000 small stickers.

There's a floor for tasting classes and experiences like mixing your own blend. Another has the highly rated restaurant, which seems more conventional, although that's only a comparative term here. The seats are Victorian-era design but in loud harlequin paint and patterned fabric. The tables are made from bits of wine barrels, or casks, or headers from fermentation tanks. Native masks look down from the walls.

The top floor is where the unclad woman swims. And that's not all: Osborn points out the glass bar is shaped like a pair of lips, while the cupboards behind it look like teeth. The lift well, decorated with arches of coloured irrigation pipe, is supposed to be a tongue and throat. Even the lifts and the stairs are art experiences, crammed with pictures.

It's not to everyone's taste. While most people we meet congratulate him and vow to be back, one observer worries it could become less like Hobart's modern art attraction MONA and more like "Chester's shed". Either way, there's no doubt it's all an extension of Osborn's imagination.

"Everyone says when they go in there, 'oh God, I've just spent a day in your head'," he admits.

And that's a place that has even puzzled him over the years. He went to McLaren Vale primary, where the small numbers meant grades were mixed together.

"It was poor education," he recalls. "My headmaster didn't believe in homework so I never got homework until I was in Year 8. And I was really poor at reading.

"I was dyslexic so I still find it difficult because I read the word ahead, and then come back to the word. So I read in circles, which is complex and weird, but I still manage to read." He boarded at PAC for high school, and thinks they only let him in because his father and grandfather had been there before (the school colours inspired the red stripe on the winery's labels). He didn't excel. "Geoffrey Bean (the headmaster) said to my father, 'we're not going to be able to do much with him you know. He'll never be able to get a degree'. Dad wanted me to get a degree in winemaking. I was pretty slow. I was good at science ... I could understand it all. When I finished my matric I got Cs throughout." His marks weren't helped by the fact his speech at that time was also dyslexic, the words out of order. "They called me Muddle," he says of his school nickname. "Then they called me Twisted, and then Twisted Beak ..." He wasn't insulted at all. "It was great ... other people had really bad, cutting names. Mine was pretty humorous really." As final exam results came in, it looked like Bean was right. But while Osborn failed to get into Roseworthy Agricultural College at first go, he took a year off and did physics and chemistry at night school while working at the winery. It paid off and he was accepted the second time, finishing sixth out of 26.

"So my brain must have been worked a bit," he says. "But I found out years later I also have Asperger's, which isn't a negative, it can be a positive. You can push through all the barriers. You do get fixated on things, the detail." It's a surprising revelation, given that the condition is often associated with lack of eye contact, awkwardness, shyness. Osborn looks you in the eye and is the opposite of shy.

He says when he was having difficulty with his marriage, now over, he saw a psychologist who tested his personality. "He said 'wow, that's quite interesting. I've been doing this test for 35 years and I've never had anyone get the perfect score for extroversion until now'," Osborn says. "That means when you go out you get energy, and when you stay at home you lose energy. Introverts are the other way round." It made sense to him. "I was always first to a party and last to leave, or didn't leave ... usually they put me out so they could go to bed." That is probably thanks to his parents, both very social people, although different in outlook. His father leaned to pessimistic, his mother Pauline more optimistic – not to mention eccentric.

Mark Lloyd, winemaker from nearby Coriole, remembers being treated by Pauline, who was a physiotherapist.

"She'd ply me with stories about Chester, even as a two-year-old when she took him down to the winery. She'd say, 'I told Chester, you're going to be a great imaginative winemaker one day.' She gave confidence to her children." Osborn remembers hearing that too, from his mother. "She loved to chat. She talked a lot. She was very outgoing, always travelled overseas alone without my father," he says. "She was one of the preferred physiotherapists of the royal family in London and she was Dame Margot Fonteyn's private physio at the heart of her career, for two years travelling throughout Europe.

"She was eccentric. When you sat down for a meal, she had a lot to say, everyone else couldn't get a word in. And she wouldn't eat. Dad would say 'Come on Pauline, you've got to eat your fish, it's getting cold' — he'd caught it, made it — and she'd say 'Shut up d'Arry I'm talking'. And then she wouldn't start eating until we'd all left the table." As odd as that was, Osborn says his mother's life philosophy was beautiful, and went to her optimism: Out of every bit of bad that happens, twice as much good will happen. "I firmly believe that," he says.

He could point to his own experience in the winery. When he completed his studies, he was advised to go and work for other bigger companies and not head back to the family business. But times were tough back in 1983, and d'Arry warned that if he did go elsewhere there may not be a company to come back to.

"So he said I had to come home," Osborn says. "The good thing about not being indoctrinated in a big winery, or any other winery, is I really had to work out how to make wine myself. My father could tell me what he did, but he didn't have time to go out in the vineyard and taste and work out exactly what sort of flavours he wanted to get, and how to manipulate a vine with not putting fertiliser on so you get the soil and geology characters."

You might think that hanging around a winery your entire life would give you a natural sense of how to make everything work, a sense of what to look for, how things should taste.

No, he shakes his head. He did drink wine from age of seven, because he'd steal it from the winery, and invite his friends over. "We used to go and do a tree crawl ... a d'Arenberg bubbly, and hock, dry red, fortified wine, all under a different tree. After that we worked out how not to get drunk. I didn't like the taste of dry red and dry whites for many, many, years. Well and truly after I left school. It was just too strong." But, once he got out into the vines, "I surprised myself," he says. "After the first two or three years of making wines, I worked out whites pretty quickly, but red wines I found a lot harder. I remember saying to myself, I don't know if I'll ever get this, how to make great red wine. I just looked harder and harder, and started to work it out." He also put a lot of effort into marketing overseas, exported to 90 countries, and benefited from an export boom. These days he produces more than 70 different wines, with about a third of the grapes shiraz. His father was famous for flagons, and in those days the winery produced only a few thousand dozen bottles. It's been up to 350,000 dozen since, and about 300,000 these days, with 20 distributors in China alone. And, Osborn insists, it's not a science.

"It's 95 per cent art," he says. And the point of it is? "To make the greatest wine you can from that bit of dirt. To give the lovely character of the soil, and the geology; you want to make a wine that's the best balanced fruit character for that vineyard; so not pick it too early or too late.

"There is a window of like three days of when the best time is to pick to make the style of wine I want to make – which is that it has to age. To be really great it's got to age 20 years. Often the really expensive wines in Australia, the ripest, fattest, oakiest wines, they don't age at all. They fall over quickly. Partly it's picking at the right time." And how does he know when to pick? "I go out and taste the grapes. It's purely taste. It's not science at all. We check sugar level with a refractometer. But it's just a guide." It's the sort of thinking he'll pass on to the youngest of his three daughters, Mimi, now in Year 10, who he says has been keen for years to follow him as the fifth-generation family winemaker.

"He's philosophically led," says Lloyd from Coriole. "He believes in natural, biodynamic, he believes in not fertilising ... a purist in many ways." Lloyd says Osborn's palate is excellent. "He's eminently knowledgeable about the world of wine. His style is structured wine, wine for food. He's not about light, sweet wines for the terrace in summer, a popular trend of late." Osborn is generous, working with others to promote the region, and full of disarming qualities. "There's a Dali-esque quality to him. Surrealism, artistic interpretation, goodness knows. That ability to talk about anything – it mesmerises people. Sometimes you think it's bullshit, but it's so easy to listen to," says Lloyd.

Doug Govan, who runs the Victory Hotel at Sellicks Beach and the Star of Greece restaurant, is a good friend. He thinks The Cube is helping put a new tourism focus on McLaren Vale, which has watched the Barossa Valley receive a lot of government support over recent years. And that's thanks to Osborn.

"He's colourful, positive, and generous beyond belief," Govan says. "Have a dinner party and invite Chester and he'll bring five decanted bottles ready to go." He's got a lot to choose from. With 17,000 bottles in his two cellars, no wonder Osborn is so well versed in the broader world of wine. That's even more extraordinary when you realise he only ever buys three of any wine from a particular vintage, drinking them at different stages of maturity.

That makes him a bit old school. Today, there's less interest in sipping and savouring and taking notes. But he knows that, and it's why The Cube exists. Wine is evolving.

Already he's had up to 1400 people through in one day, with an entry fee of \$10. Part of the lure is the proximity of McLaren Vale to the city, compared to some interstate wine regions. But it's also about what you provide. Visitors, whether from the growing ranks of Chinese tourists or younger travellers from Australia, have different expectations. "People don't want to come in anymore and just taste wine," he says. "That's boring. People today are more interested in experiences than objects. The next generation don't have lots of stuff, but they do have experiences." The Cube is certainly that. Although he admits he's already running out of space as his collection grows and new ideas evolve. Plans are well advanced for a new line of loud shirts, costing up to \$1000 each, with the label Beakus Twisterus (after his school nickname). He plans to model them on lingerie clad mannequins hanging from the pipes on the top floor, where the naked woman currently swims.

That sounds weird, even for him. Is he worried what people might think? "No, I don't get too worried about things," he says. "If you start doubting yourself, you'll have problems." •

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