

The Real Review

The Penfolds alter ego wines



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In WINERY SPOTLIGHTS



Alongside that hearty 'House Style', Penfolds winemakers have experimented thoughtfully and skilfully to introduce variations on the theme. [WINE AUCTION HOUSE](#)

Few Australian wine brands have the same gravitas as [Penfolds](#). Despite the machinations of corporate changes, takeovers, trends and changing fashions, not to mention the onslaughts of “brand managers,” all factors that have decimated some of Australia’s great wine names, this famous label has survived relatively intact.

There are many reasons for this ongoing success, but at their heart are wine quality, and the maintenance of a distinctive, consistent house style that’s struck a chord with wine lovers across the globe.

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The foundation of the modern [Penfolds](#) wine story centres on red wine. From the 1950s onwards, the style of Penfolds red wine that came to be universally recognised was the type pioneered by legendary winemaker Max Schubert with his famous [Grange](#). A multi-regional blend, dark, ripe and profound, new-American-oaky, resting on big tannins and very ageworthy, it was a prototype for generations of Australian red wines to come. But within the Penfolds stable there were always wines that bucked the trend.

... Australian wine types with nearly 177 years of tradition, but also as a producer of new-wave alter-egos to those established styles.

Alongside that hearty ‘House Style’, Penfolds winemakers have experimented thoughtfully and skilfully to introduce variations on the theme. Starting way back in Grange’s early days, when Max Schubert’s winemaking colleague John Davoren resurrected the 1890s [St Henri](#), the idea of “alternative” Penfolds red wine styles has been a constant theme, despite the primacy of the Grange type.

[St Henri](#) was lighter, less overt, less robust than [Grange](#). It was made from grapes of similar high quality, untouched by new oak, and generally made less formidable and opulent. In his outlook John Davoren was a more conventional Australian winemaker than Max Schubert, but St Henri still occupied an important place in the Penfolds product hierarchy. Until the 1970s it was a true alter ego of Grange – with the same price tag.

That famous Penfolds red wine style was established by Schubert, and it continued to be championed by subsequent chief winemakers. Peter Gago, who currently heads up the Penfolds team, refers to Grange and the other Max Schubert-inspired wines like [Bin 389](#) as “the classics that are still there from Max’s day. The rock-solid anchors.”

But Gago also points out that Penfolds winemaking was never completely set in stone.

“It was always a voyage of exploration,” he says. “And as resources

expanded and the wines evolved, experimentation continued.”

There have only ever been four Penfolds Chief Winemakers, and all have maintained the tried and true House Style well, tweaking it here and there in the quest for constant improvement, but at the same time developing ground-breaking variations on the theme.

After Grange, Max Schubert developed the Bin range of reds that became the company’s mainstream, typified by [389](#), [28](#), [128](#) and [707](#), but he also messed around with a legendary range of experimentals and show wines, with a plethora of out-of-the-norm Bin numbers like [60A](#), [620](#), and oddball names like Kalimna Burgundy.

Don Ditter, who followed Schubert as Chief Winemaker in 1975, continued the experimentation, developing Magill Estate Shiraz in 1983. Where Grange was a blend of regions, [Magill](#) was a single vineyard wine from Penfolds original estate in the Adelaide suburbs. Grange matured in American oak. Magill employed a proportion of French. Grange was all about power, Magill was finesse.

Ditter also expanded the Penfolds house style into a new market with the cheaper but true to style Koonunga Hill, and he re-released Bin 707, a sort of Grange made from cabernet sauvignon after a hiatus of six years.

Next, in 1986 at the Penfolds helm was [John Duval](#) who introduced a wine known oddly as Red Winemaking Trial, or [RWT and lately Bin 798](#). Grange was all about muscle, structure and concentration, RWT was fleshy, fragrant, smooth. Only French oak was employed, and it was 100% Barossa rather than a blend.

Duval continued producing legendary specials like [90A](#) and expanded the Bin range with [407](#), a much less macho cabernet than 707, and Old Vine Barossa Valley, now [Bin 138](#), a three-way blend of shiraz, grenache and mataro given only old oak. John Duval also set in motion the quest for a “white Grange” that resulted in [Yattarna](#), a super-premium chardonnay to rank with Australia’s best.

Current Chief Winemaker Peter Gago took the reins in 2002 and enthusiastically embraced the Penfolds culture of experimentation and established it worldwide. He continued producing special one-offs and special additions to the range like the single-vineyard cabernet sauvignon [Kalimna Block 42](#), and a [Coonawarra Bin 169](#), a French-oaked alternative to the Grange-like 707.

Then onto shiraz: a subregional [Marananga Bin 150](#), a [Kalimna Bin 170](#), a [Clare-Barossa Bin 111A](#)... and a Gago masterpiece known as [g3](#), an extraordinary blend of three different Grange vintages where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

A [g4](#) followed, and a g5 is on the way. Peter Gago also loves Champagne and pinot noir, and as a result Penfolds now produce an excellent range of top-shelf Champagnes in France in collaboration with French house [Thiénot](#). Gago's interest in pinot noir has expanded the standard bin range with [Bin 23](#), a wine that points in a new direction for the company.

Today the Penfolds name is as revered as ever as a source of completely reliable Australian wine types with nearly 177 years of tradition, but also as a producer of new-wave alter-egos to those established styles. Some of the latter are rare and very expensive, but others expand the more affordable end of the Penfolds range into new territory. It will be fascinating to see what the future brings.

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