

PLANT- POSITIVE PLONK

Vegetable-based diets are about more than just what you put on your fork, with cellar doors and wine lists increasingly opting to display their vegan-friendly credentials.

WORDS BY MICHELLE MEEHAN

Whether it's a health-based decision or an ethical lifestyle choice, growing numbers of Australians are choosing to follow a vegan or vegetarian diet.

The figure has been on the rise for years. According to Roy Morgan research, the number of Australian adults whose diet was all – or almost all – vegetarian jumped from 1.7 million people (or 9.7 per cent of the population) to about 2.1 million (11.2 per cent) between 2012 and 2016.

Catering for this section of the market has become big business. Australia's packaged vegan food industry is expected to be worth \$215 million a year by 2020, with research firm Euromonitor International also naming Australia as the third fastest growing vegan market in the world.

Yet while food producers and restaurants have been quick to jump onto the vegetable-based bandwagon, finding a suitable meal isn't the only problem for vegans and vegetarians.

Choosing to bypass animal-based products means removing them from your glass as well as your plate.

That may not sound like the toughest assignment, but wine-loving vegans may be surprised to learn that many of their favourite full-bodied reds or crisp, clean whites have traditionally been produced using more than just the fruit of the vine.

The winemaking process can involve fining, which is designed to improve clarity and remove some of the bitterness or tannins from the final product.

A number of protein-based agents have been used by winemakers to achieve this result, with the most common including gelatine, milk

SOMMELIER SELECTIONS

A three-time sommelier of the year across various awards, Sydney restaurant owner Nick Hildebrandt knows a thing or two about fine wine. Here are his top five vegan-friendly wines from the Australian and international wine scenes.

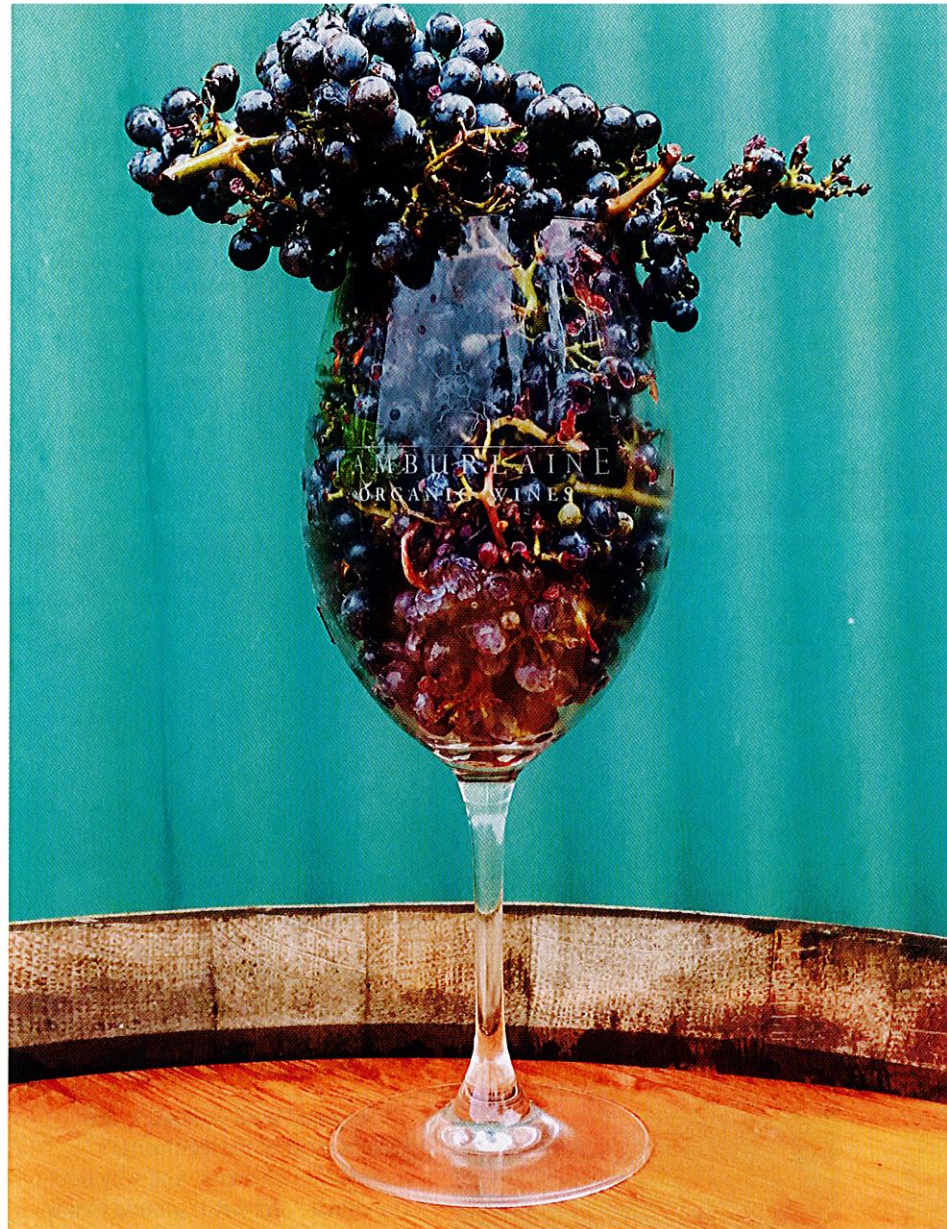
1 Harkham Wines
Aziza's Semillon
2017, Hunter Valley,
NSW

2 Jean Foillard
Morgon
Côte du Py 2016,
Beaujolais, France

3 Foradori
Fontanasanta
Manzoni Bianco
2017, Trentino, Italy

4 Pierre Overnoy
Ploussard
2014, Jura, France

5 Domaine de
L'Anglore
Tavel Rosé 2015,
Rousillon, France.



(also known as casein) and egg whites. Some winemakers also use isinglass, which is a collagen obtained from the swim bladders of certain fish.

The thought of these products may make vegans collectively step away from their wine glasses in horror. But there are many wines on the market that are free from all animal proteins.

Based in the heart of the Hunter Valley wine region in NSW, Tamburlaine Organic Wines has been testing the use of vegetable-based fining agents for years. Since its 2017 vintage, Tamburlaine – which is Australia's largest organic wine producer – has been making 100 per cent vegan-friendly wines.

Tamburlaine co-owner and chief winemaker Mark Davidson says that making the change was as much about the pursuit of organic excellence as it was about responding to the market, and clarifying the common misconception that organic automatically equates to vegan-friendly. "We've been on a

journey that's been almost 20 years now towards being a fully certified organic producer," says Davidson. "And that wasn't for a marketing gimmick, it was because it was better. It was better farming. It had better consequences for the farm and for the environment that we work in.

"The organic space is still in some people's minds a confused space, as they don't understand it. One of the consequences is that there were a lot of people who were vegan by choice who had the assumption that somehow organic wines were providing to them a vegan-friendly option."

Davidson says that the quality of vegetable-based fining agents means there is nothing stopping all winemakers from producing vegan-friendly wines, apart from the self-imposed barrier of habit.

He says: "Like most things in the world, it's beating the habit of doing things in a particular way that is the primary step before change happens. "We were very open to [making

vegan-friendly wines] because we've got a habit of breaking habits if we can see good sense."

Davidson believes the new fining agents are helping Tamburlaine produce better wines overall, with the winery winning more medals and trophies at wine shows since making the switch. This includes its success at the International Organic Wine Awards in Germany, where two of its vegan-friendly red wines picked up gold medals.

He says: "Now that a new generation of vegetable-based fining agents are available and have been fully tested by our winemaking team on premium reds and whites, we are confident they are doing the job as well as the traditional products, but with much better results overall."

"People are more conscious of what they're putting in their bodies."

NICK HILDEBRANDT

Yalumba Family Vignerons is also proudly vegan-friendly, having completely moved away from the use of fining agents in 2011.

Instead of replacing animal proteins with vegetable- or mineral-based ones, the South Australian-company tinkered with its processes to achieve the same result without the need for fining.

Yalumba's chief winemaker, Louisa Rose, says it's about reducing the level of intervention required – while also embracing some of those qualities that were previously being stripped out of the wine.

"We didn't necessarily have a problem with the fining agents because they were from animals," she says. "But what we knew is when you add those things to wine, not only are they taking out maybe a perceived bitterness or a problem you might have created by making a mistake in a wine, they're also very absorptive ... so they're going to be stripping out flavours and sometimes colour and other things that we, as winemakers, spend all our time in the vineyards growing and trying to preserve.

"We didn't like what they were doing – their sort of side activities – so we thought if we can get things better in the vineyard and we are really

careful in our early winemaking, and we don't make mistakes, then we shouldn't need to use them."

Rose's team has worked very hard to achieve their results. "We're clever winemakers. We understand a lot of what's really going on in our winemaking from the science point of view, and having an understanding of all that means we can actually do less in our winemaking; we can make wines that have less intervention in them," she says.

"We also started looking at white wines as an accompaniment to food, rather than being something on their own. We were getting some of the textures naturally in our wines that winemakers might have thought we needed to get rid of a couple of decades ago. But we were actually really liking them and embracing them in food matching.

"So having wines that perhaps were a little bit edgier and a little bit more savoury, a little bit more interesting, was actually something that we really liked."

Chasing the vegan market might not have been Yalumba's motivation, but it has worked in its favour. The winery has received plenty of positive feedback, especially after adding a vegan-friendly label to the bottles.

"All of a sudden, we started having all these emails coming through from vegans saying, 'This is fantastic and we're really pleased that somebody's looking out for us,'" says Rose.

"It was a nice sort of synergy between the philosophy of making better wine and having a group of people that were really pleased we were doing it.

"So we have embraced it, and we've embraced it with some of the foods as well. We have always been really keen to think about what food our wines go well with. We've always got food matches for our wines, and now we always have vegan food matches for our wines as well."

Tamburlaine is likewise exploring this aspect, hosting vegan cheese-and-wine tastings as well as its first 'long lunch' featuring five vegan courses paired with Tamburlaine's organic and vegan-friendly wines.

Award-winning sommelier Nick Hildebrandt knows more than most about vegan food-and-wine pairings.

Together with chef Brent Savage, he runs four of Sydney's most exciting restaurants – including Potts Point favourite Yellow, which in 2016 became Sydney's first fine-dining

VEGAN FOOD AND WINE MATCHES

Winemakers

Mark Davidson, of Tamburlaine, and Louisa Rose, of Yalumba, recommend some of their tastiest food and wine matches:
Tamburlaine Organic Wines Wine Lovers Verdelho Semillon 2017

Pair it with: Roasted field mushroom with crisp quinoa and Persian feta.

Tamburlaine Single Vineyard Block 15 Chardonnay 2015

Pair it with: Five-spiced fried tofu with miso sauce and sugar snap peas.

Tamburlaine Organic Wines Wine Lovers Pinot Noir 2017

Pair it with: Chickpea-battered eggplant with creamy carrot and saffron purée.

Yalumba The Signature Cabernet Sauvignon & Shiraz 2013

Pair it with: A portobello mushroom burger topped with crispy onion rings, roasted capsicum and beetroot relish, with sweet potato fries on the side.

Yalumba Block 2 Grenache Rosé 2017

Pair it with: Roast pumpkin, kalamata olive and sage bruschetta, topped with a drizzle of truffle oil.

Yalumba Eden Valley Viognier 2017

Pair it with: Sri Lankan curry of sweet potato, cauliflower and green beans, topped with toasted cashews and fresh coriander.



restaurant serving a 100 per cent vegetarian and vegan dinner menu. Hildebrandt says that demand from consumers for vegan and vegetarian options has made Yellow very busy.


"We've seen movement over many, many years but vegetarian and vegan needs and requests have, just recently, been rising and rising," says Hildebrandt.

"There was this big market opening for it in high-end dining, so we sort of took the leap of faith and created Yellow. We've never really looked back. It has been unstoppable. It's probably our busiest restaurant," he says.

The vegetable-themed menu has naturally influenced the make-up of the wine list as well – but Hildebrandt says providing high-quality vegan-friendly wines is a far easier task these days.

"We definitely have a more natural-leaning wine list, and wines with minimal intervention at Yellow," says Hildebrandt.

"It's not really hard for wine to be vegan, and a lot of winemakers don't fine or filter their wine, and haven't done so for many, many years. Some of the big commercial wineries obviously try and filter using milk protein or eggs, or blood or fish oil, but most of the smaller wineries don't filtrate or fine their wines, so I would say there's probably more vegetarian, and vegan wines out there than there isn't," he says.

"People these days are a little bit more conscious of what they're putting in their bodies, so that's probably a catalyst in the growing demand for vegan and vegetarian options. I can't see it slowing down," Hildebrandt says. 

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