

Towering in vino

This new Hunter project is a real palate pleaser.

● I walk into the cellar door at the Tower Estate winery in the heart of the Hunter Valley and I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's not the antique furniture that gets to me, or the wonderful painted tiles by John Perceval, or the medieval Tuscan terracotta feel of the place. You'd expect all that at a winery conceived by that longtime ostentatious lover of the good life, Len Evans. It's not the radiant blue shirt of winemaker

Dan Dineen, either, that floors me. I can even cope with the incongruous sound of radical reggae outfit Black Uhuru thudding from the speakers behind the tasting counter.

No, the thing I find staggering about cellar door at Tower Estate is that all the wines the young company has released since it opened last year are still available. I find this staggering because I know

these wines have been produced in limited quantities – it's Evans's intention never to produce more than 1000 cases of any one wine – and because they are some of the best wines in the Hunter.

Tower was dreamed up (and designed) by Evans after his first major Hunter winery, Rothbury Estate, was taken over by Foster's in 1996. Evans has a remarkable capacity for charming people to part with their money and, before long, he had convinced 12 unlikely bedfellows – including that other larger-than-life Hunter entrepreneur, Brian McGuigan, and celebrity chef Rick Stein – to join him in his dream. (The dream, by the way, includes a small, luxury \$6 million hotel and conference venue, Tower Lodge, a short stroll away from the winery,

decorated unforgettably in a mixture of antique Chinese, Greek temple and end-of-Empire provincial French.)

Evans also has a remarkable ability to source grapes (not surprising when you've been in the business as long as he has): the riesling, sauvignon blanc, Barossa shiraz and Coonawarra cabernet fruit used are from Petaluma, Shaw and Smith, Peter Lehmann and Yalumba, respectively, while the shiraz fruit that goes into Tower's top of the range Hunter red comes from the 70-year-old Tallawanta vineyard in Pokolbin.

Dineen, though, is probably Evans's greatest asset. Recognised during his time at Brokenwood as one of the country's most promising

young winemakers, he has more than proved himself since starting at Tower.

While every wine in the portfolio is good, there are some glaring standouts (the first price quoted is single bottle, cellar door; the second is part of a dozen, which can be mixed). The 2000 Hunter semillon (\$22/\$19.80) is sourced from a 30-year-old block in Pokolbin and is a classic wine: grassy, herbal, pea-water smells, with chalky, lanolin flavours and crisp austerity. It'll age gracefully. The 2000 Clare riesling (same prices) is absolutely stunning, with staggeringly aromatic, scintillating mandarin, lemon and lime characters. It'll also age well. As I say, these wines were still available – just – in mid-January.

The 2000 Hunter chardonnay (\$26/\$23.50) is hugely regional, with ripe, forward, bold pineapple and cornmeal flavours and a rich creaminess. The 1999 Barossa shiraz (\$35/\$31.50) is also unmistakably regional: full, meaty, ripe, almost sweet and syrupy, a real mouthful of red wine.

But the 1999 Hunter shiraz (\$28/\$25.20) is my overall pick: it's a sensationally intense, spicy, vibrant, modern interpretation of the sinewy, earthy Hunter red style. All three are still very much available.

Tower Estate is on the corner of Halls and Broke Roads, Pokolbin, and is a must-visit the next time you're in the Hunter. Telephone (02) 4998 7989 or e-mail: sales@tower-lodge.com.au ☺