

GROSSET WINES

Four decades on, this pioneering Clare Valley producer's commitment to making world-class Riesling is unwavering – a goal that's led its founder to embrace biodynamics, blockchain projects and more. By **David Sly**

The single-minded pursuit of purity in Riesling expression is Jeffrey Grosset's obsession, although it's not manic energy that fuels his relentless engine. The quietly spoken, self-effacing Clare winemaker's intrinsic nature is to be contemplative and analytical rather than demonstrative. It means that even on the 40th anniversary of the founding of his wine company, devoted primarily to making elite Riesling, his relentless focus on quality keeps him questioning every aspect of winemaking and production – and how he could possibly make it better.

The 40-year journey has scaled dizzy heights for a man who came into wine with scant resources and no vinous pedigree, save for the life-altering experience of trying a classic Leo Buring Riesling at the age of 15 and realising immediately that emulating such an exquisite wine would constitute his life's work. Grosset has never questioned whether his wine epiphany as a 15-year-old was a delusion. His commitment to the goal has always been, and remains, absolute – and it was this dedication that made him International Riesling Winemaker of the Year in 1998.

The early years

A 1981 photograph of Grosset, taken in the winery he had just created from a former dairy and butter factory in Auburn, a southern gateway town to the Clare Valley in South Australia, illustrates how far a winemaker can travel with an uncompromising perfectionist streak. The earnest, bearded 26-year-old with stringy hair and a rock-hard stare had only four big steel storage tanks wrapped in improvised insulation blankets in the big, barren shed. But even then, he already had a clear purpose and ambition.

'In my view, you don't make any compromises at any point – or else why bother at all?' offers Grosset, before admitting with a solemn nod that this absolute commitment has been to his personal detriment. 'Yes, my wife and family will attest to that. Devotion to achieve my absolute best in wine has always come first.'

What prompted all this? It was the love of something pure that struck Grosset from the

time his electrician father brought a bottle of wine home from a friend who worked at the Leo Buring winery and shared it over dinner with the family. Soon, Grosset started working during school holidays at a winery bottling room, spending his earnings on wine for cellaring – which he stored in a disused fireplace. At 16, he began studying oenology and agricultural science at Roseworthy College, South Australia's prestigious winemaking academy. By 21, he was working as a qualified winemaker; at 26, he was a head winemaker at Lindeman's massive Karadoc winery in Mildura – and then he decided it was time to go his own way, driven by the goal of making exemplary Riesling.

'I grew to love the characteristics of that wine, and I harboured a frustration that Riesling wasn't acknowledged. I couldn't understand why. Once I focused on Riesling, many people seemed amazed. Some thought I was some sort of a maverick. I certainly didn't pursue this as a strategy to chase a niche interest. I made the wines I loved. In the early years, a UK wine critic asked me why I specialised in an unloved grape variety, and that really took me aback. Sorry? What do you mean? Just look at the wines!'

A crucial attribute of Grosset's initial release in 1981 was two Rieslings from different Clare Valley locations – the revered Watervale district, with its distinctive lemon-lime characteristics, and the stony, austere Polish Hill River region that showed additional richness and texture. It was an unheard-of commercial decision at that time. 'I saw such distinctive attributes in the fruit from each site that I saw no point blending them together. I wanted people to see them side-by-side, so I just went ahead and bottled them separately.' It started a new serious conversation about Riesling in Australia.

The way of the vine

The pursuit of excellence soon took Grosset beyond his winery and into the vineyard, understanding that he needed to invest in planting and tending his own vines to fully realise his winemaking vision. Curiously, he first planted Cabernet Sauvignon on the high-



An autumnal view of Grosset's Riesling vineyards in the Polish Hill River region

GROSSET WINES AT A GLANCE

Founded 1981

Owner and chief winemaker

Jeffrey Grosset

Production 132,000 bottles annually (25% allocated for export); 70% of production is devoted to Riesling
Vineyards 21ha of Clare Valley estate vineyards, plus Chardonnay and Pinot Noir sourced from 3ha of Adelaide Hills vineyards



'I grew to love the characteristics of Riesling, and I harboured a frustration that it wasn't acknowledged. I couldn't understand why' *Jeffrey Grosset (left)*

elevation Gaia site in 1986, while he continued to buy Riesling fruit from other growers. A decade later, he knew exactly what he wanted. He planted three Riesling clones on 8ha at Polish Hill River and then 6ha at Springvale, a site adjacent to, and slightly more elevated than, the region's famed Watervale district.

'As soon as my wine brand got momentum, I wanted to plant vines,' explains Grosset, who adopted organic viticulture principles two years after establishing his vineyards, achieving full organic certification in 2014, >

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GROSSET WINES: A TIMELINE

1981 26-year-old Jeffrey Grosset buys a former Auburn dairy and uses Clare Valley fruit to make his first wines: dry Watervale and Polish Hill Rieslings, a late-harvest Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon

1986 Grosset buys land and plants his Gaia vineyard with 2ha of Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc. At 560m, it's the highest vineyard in the Clare Valley

1996 He plants the 8ha Polish Hill vineyard to Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon

1998 Grosset is voted International Riesling Winemaker of the Year at the Riesling Summit II held in Hamburg, Germany

2000 He plants the new 6ha Springvale vineyard to Riesling

2000 Grosset drives the Clare Valley screwcap initiative

2012 He releases the first vintage of Alea Riesling from Rockwood vineyard

2014 All of Grosset's vineyards achieve organic certification

2019 He installs a A\$500,00 (£275,000) bottling line at the Auburn winery

2020 Grosset leads the world's largest blockchain technology trial to verify the provenance of bottled wine



Grosset's high-elevation Gaia vineyard

and biodynamic certification in 2019. 'There's a limit to what you can achieve by giving directions to an independent grower. I wanted to go above and beyond that. I wanted to do everything on my terms.'

Grosset has been applauded as an early adopter of sustainable practices, but he admits it was less about making an environmental statement and more a case of chasing purity in his wines. 'I have to admit that caring for the environment wasn't my motive at all. It was all a question of how could I make a better wine. Would it be more pure if I removed more chemical influence in the vineyard, and then completely eliminated it? That was the driving factor. Organics was a means to give me exactly what I wanted in the fruit.'

Embracing organic viticulture from the early 2000s wasn't an easy path to follow. 'I had to prove the merits of the system to myself, because there was no one else doing it here. Many people thought I was crazy, saying that I'd get rampant diseases and weeds and uneven crops. I had to ignore them, pay close attention to the soil and vine health and just get on with it.'

Striving for greatness

The restless need to do better has also seen Grosset champion innovation and improvement through change, first exemplified in 2000 by choosing only screwcap closures in tandem with 12 other Clare Valley Riesling producers. He's now driving blockchain technology trials to identify the absolute provenance of his wines and thwart counterfeits. 'I have always been concerned about the image and perception of Australian wines on the world stage,' says Grosset. 'That's why I've thrown my support into these projects.'

Fastidious focus on detail has ensured a long winning streak for Grosset, with at least six successive vintages all showing outstanding characteristics. He opts for better soil and vine management to ensure greater consistency of fruit quality, rather than

finding vintages subjected to wild mood swings or uncontrollable dips and peaks. 'With knowledge and experience comes greater control,' says Grosset.

Still, winemakers must decide whether to pursue purity over complexity. Grosset's instinct is to follow purity – yet an exception to the rule is manifest in the 2020 vintage Alea off-dry Riesling. The shifting profile of this wine style over its eight vintages stems from an idea that formed after tasting fruit as it ripened in his Rockwood vineyard. He saw something other than the typical Watervale lemon-over-lime character. 'There was something more fleshy, more European rather than typically Clare Valley,' he says. He wondered how to best express this site, and pursued an off-dry style – but it is only now, after the addition of 50% pressings for the 2020 vintage (a practice he eschews in his other Rieslings) that he believes Alea has hit the mark he originally envisaged.

Not everyone is yet a fan of this off-dry style – hard comparisons are made to the bone-dry Polish Hill River and Springvale Rieslings – but Grosset insists that Alea has its place among elite Rieslings. Indeed, over the years, Grosset has steeled himself to criticism, steadfastly retaining belief in his vision. It's necessary, he says, if you're to succeed at the highest level. 'You are exposed when you're chasing that level of purity. Your belief and commitment has to be absolute. I've never deviated from that focus, which is to do the very best that I can – or else I don't deserve to be successful.'

Grosset doesn't equate success with fanfare, even on the worthy occasion of his winery's 40th anniversary. He's simply celebrating with the outstanding – though minuscule – release of his 2020 vintage Rieslings.

At 66 years of age, Grosset says there is much still to achieve, and he bristles at queries about a succession plan. The stony look of that earnest young man returns. 'I haven't finished making wine yet. Not by a long shot.' **D**

Clare Valley classics: Sly's Grosset Riesling vertical

① **Grosset, Polish Hill Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2020** 98 £33.85-£42 Exel, Liberty Wines, The Good Wine Shop

The clean, fresh aromas of just-picked citrus fruits belie the enormous power of lime juice and rich lemon pith that immediately fills the front palate on this latest vintage. There's poise in addition to the power though, with multiple layers of rounded citrus and mineral flavours enjoying a luxurious textural roll through the mid-palate. Perfect integration of fresh citric acid carries the pure fruit qualities through extraordinary length to a crisp, lip-smacking finish. **Drink** 2021-2050 **Alcohol** 12.9%

② **Grosset, Springvale Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2020** 96 £26.75-£29.99 Exel, Liberty Wines

From the first gentle whiff of pretty citrus blossoms, this exhibits a fragile, filigree beauty akin to fine porcelain. Starting with a waft of lemon meringue and a suggestion of rosewater, the sleek flavour profile is propelled by zesty limes with a lick of wet-stone minerality peeking through in a back-palate that is supple, fine and extremely long. **Drink** 2021-2050 **Alc** 12.9%

③ **Grosset, Alea Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2020** 98 £24.40-£28.99 Exel, Liberty Wines

Showing perfect balance of flavour and texture, this represents a landmark change for an Australian off-dry Riesling style. A hint of fruit sweetness is carried in a fleshy body that suggests lemon pith and rich lime with a squeeze of sharp mandarin, never allowing any awkward sweetness to jut out. The volume is more muted, with less overt acids and sugary sweetness, showing extraordinary finesse in luscious mid-palate texture. **Drink** 2021-2040 **Alc** 12.3%

Grosset, Polish Hill Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2019 96 £33.85-£43 Widely available via UK agent Liberty Wines

More intense than many young Polish Hill Rieslings, this 2019 retains great poise and shape within its rich frame. Floral notes abound – violets and lavender, lemon and lime blossom –

and such a heady perfume points towards a similarly rich palate. Intense juicy lime is carried on a tight acid spine that also bears mineral notes of shale and schist. Complex yet crisp and very persistent. **Drink** 2021-2050 **Alc** 12.5%

Grosset, Springvale Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2019 95 £26.45-£28.99 Widely available via UK agent Liberty Wines

A low-yielding harvest in 2019 ensured potent concentration of both aromas and flavours, without veering away from the clean citrus purity that is a Springvale Riesling hallmark. The influence of heady lemon blossom, lemongrass and lime juice is strong and persistent on the palate through to a mouth-puckering finish thanks to crisp, cleansing acidity – which suggests an especially long life in the cellar. **Drink** 2021-2050 **Alc** 12.8%

Grosset, Alea Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2019 94 £23.60-£27.99 Exel, GP Brands, Liberty Wines, Specialist Cellars

Capturing a sweeter stylistic expression without ever getting broad, this 2019 Alea has powerful aromatics that are reflected in its flavour profile, which shows enticing lemon and lime blossom along with dried herb notes and hints of spiky minerality. Crisp acidity defines a taut finish,

suggesting strong potential for cellaring. **Drink** 2021-2040 **Alc** 11.8%

Grosset, Polish Hill Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2018 96 £37.99 (2019) Widely available via UK agent Liberty Wines

A full, rich nose – with lavender, fresh herb and bright, zesty lime – suggests power, yet the palate opens to a more gentle weave of tightly integrated flavours. A rich mid-palate has a hint of lemon pith among intense brown lime and cool slate, all carried on a mighty girder of acid on a lengthy spine. Bone-dry, intense, persistent; leaves the mouth thirsty for more. **Drink** 2021-2050 **Alc** 12.5%

Grosset, Springvale Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2018 97 £26.99 Liberty Wines, The Secret Cellar

Purity personified in Riesling that speaks confidently about site, with pretty fresh citrus expertly coiled around a slender but firm acid spine. The floral perfume is clean and fresh, and the zesty tinkle of lemon rolling over lime defines a long, luxurious mid-palate, leading to a sublime, soft talc finish. **Drink** 2021-2050 **Alc** 12.9%

Grosset, Alea Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2018 95 £22.45-£26.99 Alexander Hadleigh,

Australian Wines Online, Exel, Liberty Wines The long, attractive whiff of lemon blossom defines an expressive wine with a surprisingly outgoing personality. The volume is turned up – more fruit sweetness and vibrant acid than you'd expect – but this ensures the line and length of its citrus flavours a focused and true. **Drink** 2021-2040 **Alc** 12.5%

Grosset, Alea Riesling, Clare Valley, South Australia 2017 95 £26.99 Liberty Wines

An easy meld of lemon pith, lime juice and lemongrass is showing great composure as it begins to mature. Initially intense, concentrated flavours have relaxed and softened as the bright acidity has settled, yet the slightly sweet edge of the palate retains impressive depth. **Drink** 2021-2040 **Alc** 12%

