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“Leading winemakers have given the 2014 vintage big raps.”

We'll drink to the 2014 vintage

Thanks to perfect ripening conditions in the Hunter Valley, winemakers are declaring this a year to remember.

The 2014 Hunter Valley vintage is being hailed as a great one, with perfect ripening conditions in a region that has notoriously wet vintages.

Leading winemakers, including Bruce Tyrrell of Tyrrell's Wines and Iain Riggs of Brokenwood, have given the 2014 vintage a big rap.

Tyrrell has compared it to the great 1965 vintage (at least for red wines) and Riggs says he rated the vintage 11 out of 10.

The Hunter Valley Wine & Tourism Association quoted a tweet during vintage from Hunter Valley Wine Show chairman of judges Jim Chatto: "1937, 1954, 1965, 2014. If you're lucky, you get one, maybe two of these vintages in your career. Make it count." Chatto is also McWilliam's Wines' chief winemaker.

Tyrrell says, "My father, Murray, was famous for regularly declaring a 'vintage of the century'. Well, this is possibly the best of both this, and last century."

Keith Tulloch of Keith Tulloch Wines' slightly more sober summary was "sensationally good".

"Some say the best of the decade, others say the best of the century," Tulloch says. "My early assessment is that 2014 fits very

easily into the 'great vintage' category, which includes 2011, 2007, 2003, 2000 and 1998, but I'm not going to proclaim it quite yet as the best."

The reds are rich and higher in alcohol than usual (14 to 14.5 per cent, compared with the usual 13 to 13.5 per cent - hence the comparison with 1965), while the semillons are also fuller and bigger - relative to Hunter style. That means about 12 per cent alcohol on average as opposed to the customary 11 per cent.

"They are wines that people will want to drink young," Tyrrell says. "They're softer, fuller, a degree of alcohol higher, and definitely not the battery-acid style semillons of the distant past."

The first of the 2014 semillons are starting to trickle on to the market. As well, the results are out from the Hunter Valley Wine Show and Hunter Valley Boutique Wine Show, both of which were judged in recent weeks, revealing a feast of gold medals for the '14s.

In the boutique show, limited to wineries crushing a maximum 350 tonnes of grapes, there was an unusually high rate of gold medals and total medals, with seven gold medals from 48 entries (14.5 per cent), and 67 per cent of entries winning a medal in the

'14 semillon classes. The 2014 wines are softer and more approachable than usual in their youth, but according to many winemakers, they are also expected to age well, a prerequisite of great Hunter semillon. Up to 10 years of improvement in a cool cellar can be expected.



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Modern Hunter semillon is more approachable generally than in the past. Summers are warmer and harvests earlier, so the wines have riper, fuller proportions. But the acidity is softer and better managed than in the past.

As well, Tyrrell says, they are not so dry: with between two and four grams per litre of residual sugar retained in the finished wines, they are softer and more palatable than the bone-dry wines of the past, "wines that they used to say 'took the enamel off your teeth,'" Tyrrell jokes.

"Semillons with four to five grams of sugar are treated as dry wines; the sweetness is not apparent, but it softens the wines when they're young and just becomes part of the complexity as they age."

The seasons are also being kinder to the Hunter: "In the past, only three out of five vintages were successful. The weather put pressure on the winemakers to pick earlier than they should have," Tyrrell says.

Several people, including Tyrrell, say 2014 was the first vintage for some time that winemakers weren't having to make decisions about, based on the weather. In both 2012 and 2013 significant rain disrupted the harvest.

As well, the 2013-14 summer was very warm, which brought the harvest forward to what Riggs says was the earliest start to vintage he's known in 32 years - and probably well before that.

In my tastings of early-release 2014 semillons, which include a trip to the Hunter and the recent boutique show exhibitors' tasting, I agree with those who define the 2014 style as accessible, with early-drinking appeal. Of course, there are wines built to age, such as Allandale, and - at the other end of the spectrum - wines that are remarkably open, charming and deliciously drinkable already, such as Midnight's Promise.

The star of the Hunter's two wine shows was Briar Ridge Dairy Hill Vineyard, which scooped a trophy at both shows for best 2014 semillon in its category.

This is a delicate, refined but intense wine with a particularly lifted fragrance that some might call grassy. But to me it's more floral than grassy, combining elements of both. It's very fresh and alive, loaded with up-front appeal, as well as length and finesse.

Thomas Braemore Cellar Reserve, on the other hand, is taut and nervy and needs more time to reveal its full charms. As usual

for this label, it will be held back for five years before release.

It's certainly a vintage for buying to both drink and cellar, although not perhaps for the long term.

In Jim Chatto's words: the '14 semillons are great drinking young and for three to seven-year cellaring, while the more classic ageing vintages, such as 2013, are 10 to 20-year cellaring wines.

And, watch out for those 2014 shirazes in two to three years' time. They will be extra special.

Hunter Valley Boutique Wine Show 2014

Gold medals: Briar Ridge Dairy Hill (trophy), Thomas Wines Cellar Reserve (trophy), Thomas Wines 'The O.C.', Thomas Wines Braemore, Gundog Estate Somerset, Tintilla Angus, Two Rivers Stones Throw.

Hunter Valley Wine Show 2014

Gold medals: Briar Ridge Dairy Hill (trophy), Thomas Braemore Cellar Reserve, First Creek Black Cluster, Peppertree Limited Release, Pepper Tree Rhodes Limited Release, Tinklers Reserve, Audrey Wilkinson The Ridge.



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Toasting success: (From top) Blue skies helped the harvest at Johnno's vineyard at Tyrrell's Wines in Pokolbin; Gundog Estate winemaker Matt Burton picked up a gold medal for his Somerset semillon.
Photos: Marina Neil, Peter Stoop