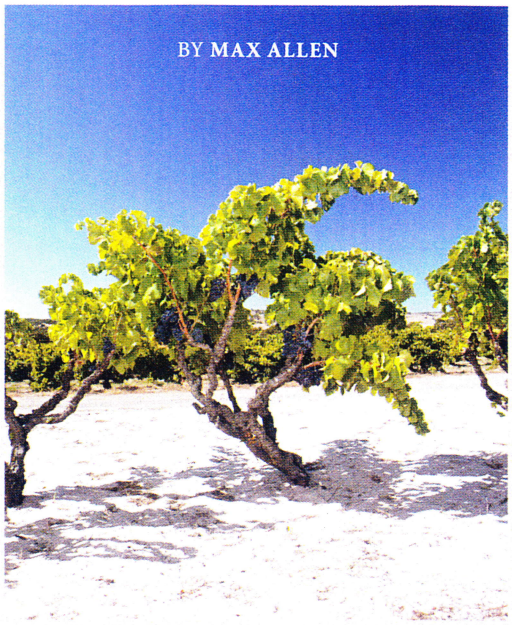
THE GREEN GAUGE

Impressive environmental initiatives are cropping up all over the country.

BY MAX ALLEN



VINEYARDS COMING CLEAN

Paxton Vineyards achieved full biodynamic certification by the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA) in time for the 2011 vintage; Gemtree Vineyards also became fully AUS-QUAL certified organic last November; and prior to the 2012 vintage, Yangarra Estate was certified in-conversion biodynamic by the Australian Certified Organic body (ACO).

This is big news for McLaren Vale, and deepens the region's green credentials substantially: between them, these three producers are now farming well over 300 hectares of vines biodynamically (viticulturist Melissa Brown uses the biodynamic preparations and techniques such as spraying horn manure and horn silica on the property, but Gemtree have chosen organic certification partly because consumers understand the term 'organic' more readily than 'biodynamic', and partly because Melissa believes it takes a long time to be truly biodynamic).

Gemtree's move to biodynamics in the vineyard is very much in tune with the Buttery family, Gemtree's owners', impressive approach to environmental stewardship. Last year the family opened a one-kilometre walking trail through 10 hectares of rejuvenated wetlands on their property. The Wetlands Ecotrail was developed in conjunction with Greening Australia, and was supported by a $56,000 Federal Government grant. In September Gemtree won a further $110,000 TQUAL grant to build an eco-friendly cellar door next to the wetlands trail, placing every visitor's experience of the brand right at the heart of the family's commitment to sustainability.

At **Yangarra**, the move to biodynamics is part of a broader commitment to quality. For the last few vintages the winery has been home to some state-of-the-art grape-sorting equipment that ensures only the purest, berries make it into the fermenting vat. The Yangarra team has also initiated some exciting (and in some cases decidedly retro) experiments, such as planting a new patch of bush vines (Paxton has also done this) and attempting to source and grow as many of the obscure southern Rhône varietals as it can – grapes with delicious names such as bourboulenc and picpoul – to join exisiting plantings of grenache, shiraz, carignan and mataro, some that date back to the 1940s.

Accordingly, there has been a noticeable leap in quality in Yangarra's wines in recent years. The 2010 vintage in particular produced some stunning bottles, all sharing a restraint and a savoury finesse that is perhaps uncommon in McLaren Vale but is decidedly welcome: the 2010 Roussanne, for example, shows exquisite peach fuzz and almond kernel characters, and the 2010 Old Vine Grenache is ripe but rippling with fine tannins. Indeed, the Yangarra story grows more interesting by the day: the Californian Jackson family, who own Yangarra, also recently bought the 80-hectare Hickinbotham Vineyard at Clarendon, a site famous both for being the highest vineyard in the McLaren Vale GI and the historical source of grapes that have found their way into a swag of internationally famous red wines such as Penfolds Grange.

McLaren Vale isn't the only region moving forward environmentally. As reported in this column last year, the 2011 vintage was not kind to the Cooper family of **Cobaw Ridge** vineyard in Victoria's Macedon Ranges. The cold, soggy growing season blanketed the vines in mildew, as it did for so many, and the family ended up picking not one grape. After an experience like that, you need all the good news you can get – so it's gratifying to learn that's exactly what's happened.

In August last year Cobaw Ridge received full organic and biodynamic certification from NASAA, and in February this year the vineyard became the latest Australian member of Renaissance des Appellations, the group of international biodynamic producers whose tasting was a highlight of the 2011 Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. Cobaw is the fifth Australian member of the group, joining Castagna, Jasper Hill, Ngeringa and Cullen.

In order to be accepted into the group, a vineyard must submit wines for tasting by a panel of existing members. The tasters are looking for truth, a sense of place, and vitality in the glass, not just technical correctness or power. I'm not surprised Cobaw was accepted: one of the wines that Alan Cooper submitted was an exceptionally fine, mineral-laced 2010 Chardonnay made with no additions at all in the winery – a wine that sings a crystal-clear song of its windswept hilltop site.

Many small vineyard owners are deeply wary about converting to full certified organic or biodynamic farming – especially after the disease-ridden 2011 vintage and another damp season in 2012 – because it removes the option of using chemical sprays in extreme circumstances. But some are adopting impressive environmental initiatives in other ways.

Allen and Andrea Hart's unique **DogRock** vineyard and winery in Victoria's Pyrenees, for example, is home to some inspirational work in sustainable energy use. The Harts have been off the main electricity grid here since 1998, opting instead to run their home and winery using solar power. There is a small petrol generator to supply power in peak times, but this is used for around 100 hours a year and has been offset by the planting of 5000 trees on the property.

The five hectares of vines here were originally established to be dry-grown, but when the Harts picked just 60 kilograms of grapes off the entire property in the drought-affected 2006 vintage, they decided to install an impressive irrigation system. Initially the petrol generator ran the system, but last year the Harts moved to solar power: a small pump moves water up the hill to a header dam when the sun is out, and gravity does the rest, taking water to the vines whenever it's needed, with zero carbon emissions.