

## New home of St Hugo in the Barossa takes wine tourism to the next level



*The home of St Hugo was built using the ironstone walls of a 1854 gravity-fed winery owned by the Gramp family. Dragan Radocaj*

by Charis Perkins

Before me are nine hand-labelled samples of cabernet sauvignon picked in March 2015 from two parcels of land at one Coonawarra vineyard, fermented two ways and then collected four ways (or is that five?) in five kinds of barrels of two sizes.

I think I have that right but it's confusing keeping track of what's what.

No matter. It's not the detail but their nose, palate and mouth feel I'm interested in for I am about to blend my own cabernet sauvignon. The spacious private tasting room where I do this looks out on an austere beautiful courtyard enclosed by ironstone walls dating back to 1854 at the new home of [St Hugo in the Barossa](#).

At my side is St Hugo's chief winemaker, Dan Swincer. In January, he conjured the label's new Icon blend – to be released in three years at about \$500 a bottle – from these same barrels. Can I blend something as fine myself? Talk about a challenge.



*The Wine Lounge is open to the public for tastings. Dragan Radocaj*

He pours glass after glass and we swirl, sniff, taste, spit and debate, dabbing ruby drops from our lips and wiping splashes from the grey marble benchtop. Swincer's blue eyes shine. He uses his hands a lot to show what he means. Some of the samples are more fragrant, some spicier, some rounder, some more driven. No matter which I choose, they are all top offerings from a "cracking vintage", he tells me.

"Seriously, this is what we do on blending days. This is the fun part," he says.

It *is* fun. I choose four bottles and he pours equal measures (according to my instructions) from each into a tall, thin beaker and fills our glasses. Nope, not right. I swap two bottles. He measures, mixes, pours again. Voila! I declare my blend done.

Then he measures out that Icon blend from four of the bottles – including two of my picks (!!) – and I know why he is the master winemaker and I work for *The Australian Financial Review*.

### **Seriously spoilt**

This is my second day as the first fully fledged guest at the new home of St Hugo, which officially opens on September 23, and I'm feeling seriously spoilt. It's all this personal attention, these passionate people, this historical setting among the vines, these "elegant and powerful" wines, as everyone keeps describing them.



*The ironstone walls of the new courtyard took six months to repaint. Dragan Radocaj*

The first St Hugo wine, released in 1983, was a 1980 vintage of Coonawarra cabernet sauvignon. It was named for Louis Hugo Gramp, the grandson of a Bavarian immigrant who planted the first commercial vineyard in the Barossa in 1847. (So the name isn't from an actual saint, I object. "What he did here in the Barossa could be called a miracle," sommelier James Boden points out. Gramp's untimely death at age 43 in a light aircraft crash burnishes the mythology.)

The Coonawarra cabernet sauvignon was the label's only wine until 2011, when the range was expanded to include fine reds from the region.

By the end of the first day, I've sampled 13 in three tastings in the Wine Lounge with Swincer and quaffed others paired with an eight-course degustation dinner at the restaurant, overseen by local legend and executive chef Mark McNamara.

Swincer has also introduced me to a dozen examples of shiraz from vineyards across the Barossa, and accompanied me on a 44 nautical mile helicopter tour of them from the air: neat rows of brown against the lush green of the hills, dams dotted all about, fat with the recent heavy rain. Come January, the vines will be green, the hills sunburnt brown, Swincer says.



*Chief winemaker Dan Swincer says St Hugo is building wines for the long term. Dragan Radocaj*

St Hugo owns only about 10 to 20 per cent of the vineyards it sources grapes from. The rest is from mostly family-owned vineyards, each with "nuanced and different" characters. "We have ongoing relationships," says Swincer. "What we're building is wines for the long term."

## Wines take lead role

From above Eden Valley to the south-west, late afternoon sunlight breaks through the cloud cover and highlights Adelaide city and the sea. The helicopter drops me off at my digs, The Louise, to freshen up. It's a five-star contemporary hotel overlooking the vineyards, with thoughtful touches like the day's weather and suggested destinations printed on a card delivered to your suite with breakfast and a newspaper every morning.

But I have only an hour or so there before I'm picked up and whisked back to St Hugo for that degustation dinner. This is no ordinary Barossa jaunt from cellar door to cellar door. This is total immersion at St Hugo, where I'm fast learning the wines are the lead actors.



*Executive chef Mark McNamara and staff create meals that take cues from the wine. Dragan Radocaj*

Much earlier in the day, McNamara, who joined operations in June just as the kitchen was being installed, told me every dish he and his team creates takes its cue from the wine, rather than the other way around, as is usual. "The only thing we're following is the wine," he said. I thought he was spouting marketing nonsense, until he and sous chef Dan Murphy tasted their way through the process with me and Pernod Ricard global wine PR manager Ruth Harris, my gracious companion for the weekend.

Little bowls filled with everything from parsley and prunes to seaweed and vanilla are lined according to taste (sour, salty, sweet, fatty, bitter and so on). McNamara opens a bottle of 2010 St Hugo Vetus Purum Shiraz and gives us each a wine and food evaluation sheet to fill in. Our job is to take sips of it with bits from the bowls and rate them according to how well they work together. Three ticks is "fabulously", a cross is "disastrously". It's hilarious but deadly serious at the same time. We all agree the lime sucks, the mushrooms are perfection.

"Flavour is about balance," says McNamara.

Finally we settle on four ingredients – guanciale, mushrooms, lemon oil and thyme – and the two chefs go off to concoct a dish from them for lunch (while I go off to taste wine). The result – guanciale, mushroom and root vegetable agnolotti with veal – is astonishing with the Vetus Purum Shiraz, and an instant hot contender for the restaurant's degustation menu. There are more perfect pairings at dinner that night in the restaurant. But the finale is served alone, a rare tawny port laid down in barrels in 1925, when Louis Hugo Gramp would have been 30 – before the Great Depression or World War II, in the same year *The Great Gatsby* was published.

"I couldn't pair this with anything," says McNamara, taking a sip of the rich, deeply coloured liquid. "It's history in a glass."

*The writer travelled as a guest of St Hugo.*

## Bespoke guest packages

**Legacy Wine Experience** A helicopter flight over the region and tastings of old vintages in the Hugo Gramp room. A personal host for the day and eight-course meal matched to wine. Transfers by luxury car. \$5000 per person

**Prestige Wine Experience** A private tour, eight-course meal and hosted tastings. A wine blending session with the winemaker, and wines delivered to your door. Includes meals, transfer by luxury car and five-star accommodation for a night in Adelaide and a night in the Barossa. \$15,000 per person

**Sainthood Experience** A chartered plane to the St Hugo vineyard in Coonawarra to name your own row of vines. A session with the chief winemaker to blend a wine, incorporating parcels from the vineyard of your row. This will be stored in the St Hugo vault and delivered to your home by the winemaker three years later. Wines delivered to your home while you wait for your blend to mature. Includes meals, transfer by luxury car and five-star accommodation for a night in Adelaide and two in the Barossa. \$150,000 for two people

**Need to know**

**Address** 2141 Barossa Valley Way, Rowland Flat, South Australia

**Details** Open daily 10.30am-4.30pm. Lunch daily noon-3pm; dinner from 6pm Friday, Saturday and Sunday

**Inquiries** Tel: (08) 8115 9200