

Philip White <http://drinkster.blogspot.com/>

Sweet Symphony

"I wanted a place where I felt right about the piece of land," said Roger Pike, drawing aromatic smoke from an old briar pipe with half its side burned away.

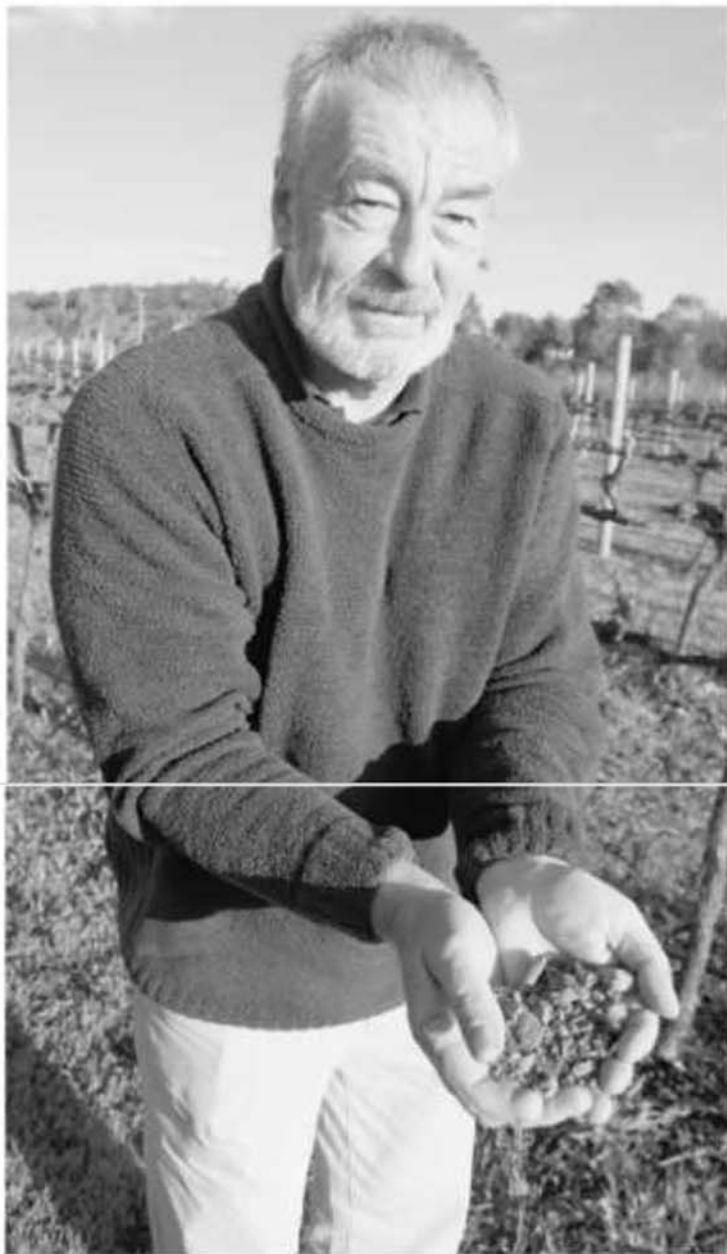
"I spotted that gravel stuff, and that felt as good as the view. It had old almonds on it. Plus there was a little go-kart track out the back, which was a lot of fun.

"Forty-five years ago, I lived at Reynella," he said, with a voice as gravelly as that Marius vineyard dirt. It's full of adventure and mystery from buccaneering about Europe with the top down; chasing fast lasses along the Riviera.

"I sort of went off into the rest of the world," he continued, waving his pipe at the sunset and the Gulf. "Big corporations. Ran businesses. Came back after all those years and everybody was still here. Now I've got a beautiful wife, a lovely daughter and a vineyard in this weird dirt."

We sat there during vintage, gazing from the verandah on the fault line just north of Willunga, tasting an array of delicious wines from that freaky fanglomerate. At some stage in the past, there's been a towering cliff or embankment which shed a talus, or scree slope of rocks of all sorts. It looks like it was dumped there in one big ker-sploush, but before it was dumped it was already mashed up and ground down and slopped about by ice and ancient waters, and mysterious, mighty upheavals.

"I'm not even picking this year," he said at that time, staring at his vines from a big easy-chair. The heatwave had toasted much of the crop, and while a neighbour wanted the rest, Roger wouldn't let his harvesting machine in. "I've still got plenty of beautiful '07 and '08 waiting to emerge, and, well, I just don't feel like making a wine that's not up to par," he said. "And I don't want a bloody machine in here, compacting the ground. Knocking my babies around." The first wine I tasted from



Roger Pike with the soil that makes his McLaren Vale vineyard so unique.

this very special 1.6ha enterprise was made in 1998 by the Bordelaise magnate, Jaques Lurton, for the French market. The vines were just four years old, but a touch of Gallic finesse rendered an intense yet delicate wine of lovely balance and style, quite unlike the chubby homogenised stuff most of the Vales churns out. I reckon it was the first export wine I'd seen with the words "Fleurieu Peninsula" on it ... it was very, very good. Since then, Roger has gener-

ally made three Marius wines a year. The best, and slowest to emerge from its surly slumber, is the Symphony. It's \$35. There are still a few boxes of '05 surviving, miraculously. I awarded it a measly 93++ here a couple of years back: I'd go 94+++ now it's begun to show its hand.

We shared an '04 the other day at The Victory, and while it's 100 per cent shiraz from a special slice of the vineyard which has had no irrigation for six years, it seems as

seamless and luxuriously silky as the '98 of Lurton: there's something sweetly hedgerow berry Bordelaise about its cushy plushness.

When the vintage is not perfect, the ultra-premium Symphony fruit goes instead into the lower appellation, called Simpatico. This occurred in 2006, and if its quality is any guide, Roger could well have called it Symphony anyway. This is probably the only wine I've had which reminded me of decaying e-type Jaguars, crows in the racing green pines, Bibles and snakes. I like a wine with snakes. It's \$25; 93+++.

Not the least of the black Marius trinity is the Symposium, a 50-50 blend of mourvèdre and shiraz. Contrary to the slow-food modest-living Epicurians of the annual gastronomy symposia founded by Michael Symons in the '80s, Roger rightly maintains that a symposium is really a noisy, boisterous, after-dinner booze-up.

"When I began planning this blend, the winemakers round here said I was nuts," he said. "You couldn't sell mourvèdre, they reckoned. Stick to shiraz. So you know what I did? I went straight back to my shed, and tipped all the barrels in a tank, so it was blended. Then I put it back in the barrels. Nobody's taken it apart."

As far as symposia goes, these two swarth varieties are certainly having a party, but it's more an orgy of treacherous midnight whispers than anything boisterously boozy. The brilliant '06 is nearly gone at 93+++ points and a steal at \$30.

Few vineyards have such a specific and freakish geology to infest their wine with such character: among all the plush silken sheen and polished syrupy fruits, the Marius wines always glower: you can feel dark glints of ironstone and dolomite among the quartz and schist bling at the bottom of this garden. Mystery, see?