

# Man on a Mission

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**PHOTOGRAPHY**

By James Morgan and Annika Kafcaloudis. Courtesy of Wine Australia.

The Yarra Valley's Mac Forbes is obsessed with the character of his vineyards and bottling it for our pleasure.

**MAC FORBES.** It's a cool name and a great name for a wine brand. But for those fortunate enough to have shaken his hand and shared a glass, it's quite clear that it's never *about* Forbes. The fact that his name appears on the label in the smallest font is no accident.

After working closely with Dr John Middleton at his iconic Yarra Valley winery, Mount Mary, Forbes' fascination with the region's capacity for elegance and "sites within sites" evolved into his own brand in 2004.

Emerging as part of an energetic and skilled cohort of Yarra Valley winemakers, including Luke Lambert and Dave Fletcher, Forbes hit the ground, armed with a brace of strong early releases that expressed the best of his (then contracted) vineyards.

Where others focus on vintage and having the best fruit in their vineyard, Forbes' obsession is with capturing the character of the vineyard itself. Of course, there's an inherent assumption that he's bought terrific vineyards in the region he loves – but I've never heard him claim that one of his Single Vineyard wines is better than another or that one subregion of the Yarra Valley produces the "best" chardonnay. When your mission is to capture the vineyard in all its glory, decisions are made differently.

While there are excellent rieslings, cabernets, syrahs and other varieties bottled under his label, it's the chardonnays and pinot noirs that are the mainstays on high-end wine lists. The energy that Forbes and his winemaking team put into the expressions and tiers is palpable.

Compared with most producers, Forbes' single vineyard wines see less new oak than the cheaper estate range. Structure is sought and found in the vineyard: in the tannins of the grapes; the natural acidity of just-ripe fruit; and in the minerals of the soil.

It takes a huge amount of focus and energy to pick his grapes in the tiny window where fruit ripeness and framework are balanced.

Forbes doesn't always get it right, and he'll be the first to tell you when he hasn't. Each instance – whether he's nailed it, or missed it by a day – is treated as an opportunity to learn and refine.

All of the chardonnays are remarkably stable wines. I've re-visited the wines over a fortnight and they've held a force field around them – as if the soft hand with oak allows the salinity and acidity. They stick firmly on the paths that have been carefully carved out for them.

In their youth, Forbes' chardonnays can be lean and unyielding in cooler seasons, driven by mineral character and acidity. Some of his earlier single vineyard wines were reductive – sulphur liberally applied and bottled under screwcap. Premium releases, now universally under cork, don't suffer the same fate. In the vintages where the stars align, they are still on the leaner side, celebrating structure rather than soft furnishing.

In the warm vintages – nutty, savoury and never straying into sweetness or clumsy territory – Forbes will always err on the side of structure.

Tasting through verticals of Mac Forbes Woori Yallock and Hoddles Creek Chardonnays confirms that the wines deserve their own voice, and that these cool-climate sites tend to sing in either alto or soprano, depending on what you have in your glass. That's the point of them – to be put on stage to showcase their tone and pitch, a quest for raw purity, uncluttered by oak or artifice.

The Villages chardonnays under the Gladysdale and Yarra Junction are both excellent, while strikingly different – as they should be. They're more accessible than the single vineyard wines of the same vintage – the ensemble choir, with richness and range.



Forbes focuses on structure first and foremost.

Like the chardonnays, the pinots are on the lighter end of the alcohol spectrum, though they show much more variation in flavour and character as they slide up the scale between 12.5% and 13% alcohol by volume. The picking window for the single vineyard wines, again, relying on the natural structure of tannins, mineral character and acidity, has to be minute.

Never overtly fleshy and always chalky of tannin, these are wines made without any consideration for cashflow, with the 2010 Woori Yallock Pinot Noir hitting a sweet spot after 10 years in the bottle. This site consistently produces wines of imposing structure, where pinosity unfurls over time in the bottle.

The 2017 Coldstream Single Vineyard Pinot Noir is vibrant and youthful – far more fragrant and red-fruited.

On tasting the new Villages pinot noir releases, it is instantly clear they achieve what they set out to do, capturing the subregion rather than one specific site within it.

Carrying the theme, the Villages 2019 from Coldstream is the softer version of its single vineyard self – more soft furnishings to it.

The 2019 Woori Yallock Villages Pinot Noir is a stunning young wine driven by pure red berry fruits, and it is far more open and supple than the single vineyard wine on release.

The Villages Pinot Noir from Yarra Junction is the funkier of the three with savoury aromatics and riper, darker fruits.

These new Villages chardonnays and pinot noirs, each different and each uniquely expressive of their subregions, bring with them the pleasant consequence of softness that affords what Mac would consider an “early release”, with 2018 single vineyards pinots and 2019 chardonnays still yet to be released.

That’s not why Mac has put them together, though. They are wines of harmony and early balance – excellent in their own right, and arguably more universally appealing than his single vineyard babies. The orchestra behind the temperamental soloist.

Importantly, they allow him to keep asking the questions he can’t help but ask: ‘How can I capture the essence of my single vineyards?’; ‘How long can my living, vital wines evolve and thrive in the bottle?’; ‘How can I make sure I don’t impart myself on this fruit?’

That’s the key to understanding Forbes, and his compelling wines.

## The Wines

### ➡ 2019 VILLAGES RELEASES

#### **2019 Mac Forbes Gladysdale Villages Chardonnay, A\$55**

A youthful, pale yellow in the glass. Lean and focused when swirled. Lemongrass and mineral salts, high-toned and agile. There’s softly spoken oak, lemon pith, and the whitest of stone-fruits – pure and driven, and just enough fruit to counter the acidity. No doubt way too early in its life to sing in its proudest voice. Would love to revisit in a year. 92 POINTS

#### **2019 Mac Forbes Yarra Junction Villages Chardonnay, A\$55**

An instantly compelling nose – lemon pith, fresh peanuts, a tease of reduction, vanilla and mineral salts. There’s richness and flesh to this. Riper nectarines and green apples; acidity in balance. It’s a lovely, delicate chardonnay. 95 POINTS

#### **2019 Mac Forbes Woori Yallock Villages Chardonnay, A\$55**

Pale and ultra-youthful. There’s a lively salinity to it as well as a more savoury nougat note, aromas rounded out by lemon oil. Ripe lemons and pale peaches on the palate, with a sea-spray freshness. Flesh in balance with its structure. A lovely, honest expression of Woori Yallock. Masterful. 95 POINTS

#### **2019 Mac Forbes Yarra Junction Villages Pinot Noir, A\$55**

A puzzling wine in the glass – bright red. Not many look like this. Ripe red berries cinnamon and red plums. Palate wise, it’s light-footed and fresh – but selling itself short. Pinosity is unquestionable. 94 POINTS

#### **2019 Mac Forbes Woori Yallock Villages Pinot Noir, A\$55**

This is instantly compelling – ripe and rich notes of dark cherries and strawberries. There’s a gentle perfume that lifts it higher again. Red berries carry the palate – cherries and cranberries – oak is in the back row. Brilliant wine, without being obvious. 95 POINTS

#### **2019 Mac Forbes Coldstream Villages Pinot Noir, A\$55**

More savoury than sweet: wild mushrooms and dried cranberries rather than grunge or bass. Lovely flesh and sinew balance. This wine is built to be enjoyed in its youth and represents a new direction for the label – ready and accessible. 92 POINTS

## ➡ HODDLES CREEK CHARDONNAY VERTICAL

### **2010 Mac Forbes Hoddles Creek Chardonnay, A\$110**

Extremely fresh looking for a 10-year-old. A wine that needs to be given a swirl and some time to enjoy its liberation. Lemon curd and rind drive the aromatics; oak very quiet; a tease of vanilla and sulfide; roasted nuts too. Extremely complex though no signs of descent into secondary savouriness. There's a soft burst of sweet fruit on the front palate – nectarines wrapped in lemon essence. Riddled with citrus energy. Acidity starting to perfectly match the fruit. If anything, it needs more time to soften. 95 POINTS

### **2015 Mac Forbes Hoddles Creek Chardonnay, A\$70**

Medium yellow from centre to rim. More minerals and florals than overt citrus – though the latter is certainly there in the form of lemon rind and pith. A saline edge to it that lifts the aromatics. A rich nuttiness to the palate – hazelnuts – and caramel also in the mix. An oxidation to it, adding complexity ahead of a return of crisp citrus acidity on the finish. Disjointed as it stands and left me questioning the closure. 87 POINTS

### **2017 Mac Forbes Hoddles Creek Chardonnay, A\$65**

Pale yellow with some youthful glints of green. A measured dose of sulfides – sea spray and minerals. More limes than lemons. Pristine chardonnay fruit – piercing and uncluttered. Intense and delicate all at once. Way too early in its life to be showing all of its charms. Brimming with potential and an energy that is impossible to ignore. A cool-climate benchmark. 97 POINTS