

Bush vines at The Islander Estate Vineyards after the fires; and (below) Jacques Lurton in the same vineyard before the fires.



The Islander Estate Vineyards on Kangaroo Island was one of many Australian wineries to be severely impacted by the bushfires over summer. But as **James Halliday** writes, they are determined to rise again.



IT'S IMPOSSIBLE for anyone who had visited Kangaroo Island before summer's appalling bushfires not to be devastated looking at before and after photographs of such a beautiful place. My first visit was as a tourist more than 30 years ago, and I was bewitched by the diversity of the beauty of the coastal areas, the marine and terrestrial wildlife, native flowers, and vegetation of the inland. All this, and a sense of awe as you came face to face with the sheer size of the island. My return visits were all wine related, in particular, to The Islander Estate Vineyards, established in 2000 by Jacques Lurton, a member of a distinguished Bordeaux wine family. After graduating from Bordeaux University's Institute of Oenology in 1983, he flew the nest, arriving in Australia, first working at McWilliam's in Griffith before finding salvation at Petaluma, becoming a lifelong friend of Martin Shaw and Brian Croser. In 1985, he returned to Bordeaux, but came back each year for short periods as his flying winemaker

role started to blossom. In 1988 and 1989, he and Martin Shaw joined forces to create Hardy's Domaine de la Baume in Languedoc in the south of France. By 1991 he was consulting and/or making wine in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Moldova, Spain, Italy and France, as well as Australia. In 1993, he was appointed production consultant for Vina San Pedro in Chile, overseeing growth from 600,000 cases in 1994 to three million cases in 2000. In 1995, his brother Francois left the family business, joining Jacques to form JFL Advisory, setting a hectic pace of joint venture or outright ownership of new wine businesses (vineyards and wineries). A small part of his business interests was the sale of corks; in those days, Australia was a large purchaser, which meant at least one trip a year. So it was that in 1999 he visited Kangaroo Island for the first time. After consulting with his wife, he flew to the island with David Paxton, this time receiving consulting advice, not dispensing it; Paxton being one of the most experienced soil/viticultural experts in Australia. Five months of hole-digging and discussions with locals led to the acquisition of a 280ha property in the Kohinoor Hills district, and the close-planting of 10ha of shiraz, grenache, cabernet franc, sangiovese, malbec, semillon and viognier, variously trained as bush vines, or tied to a single stake on a conventional trellis, setting the scene for years of experiments.

The same ethos reigned in the winery, most obviously in the fermenters. These had been made to order by a Burgundian family whose core business (with a 100-year history) was the making of concrete burial crypts, but had extended to fermenters at the request of a local winery. The unique features are walls 300mm thick, leading to thermal insulation, and fine yet dense concrete. The secret lies in the use of purified water and highly refined concrete mixture. They have the usual array of stainless steel fittings, and come in two sizes: 'three people' or 'six people' are the descriptors. Their location in a winery far from passing cars poses other questions. Why such a large property? And why have the winery so far from passing traffic? As Jacques says, it was important to buy a large property. "The beauty of the island should be the first impression when you enter. After all, a vineyard is a vineyard, a winery is a winery." In 2012, Colorado pair Yale and Maren Norris fell under the spell of Kangaroo Island. In the late '90s, they operated a wholesale tour business, selling tours to Australia and the Pacific, and became aware of Kangaroo Island. They sold the business in 2011, and moved to the island in 2012, Yale becoming full-time manager of The Islander Estate, buying a share of the business in 2015. When I last visited, he said, "We think it's about as close to paradise as you can get." But it was a case of paradise lost in January. The first fires started by dry lightning strikes in mid-December, but were contained. Then on January 3, storms created fires on the western end of the island and the very large Flinders Chase National Park. Then, January 10 brought strong winds fanning existing fires and a firestorm that roared east and north, taking almost half of the island. This blaze, fuelled by nearby commercial pine plantations and the Pandana Conservation Area adjacent to The Islander Estate's property, took everything in its wake: the vines, posts, irrigation dripper line, foliage wires, offices, wine lab, housing water sources and sheds. The winery was saved by sacrificing all other buildings to the fire. The destruction also

claimed 150ha of cropping land leased to a local farmer, and 80ha of pristine remnant native bush. The winery held all of the wine maturing in tanks, vats and barrels, and all bottled wine. The Herculean task of clearing the moonscape of twisted metal and remnants of wood and fallen trees might have broken the will of Jacques and Yale if not for the assistance and support from all quarters, official and unofficial, including friends, neighbours, volunteers and total strangers. Team Rubicon Australia, an international disaster non-profit organisation, provided physical and organisational back-up in the first days. It undertook tree felling and heavy clean-up work while the winery team was, as they say, still in shock. BlazeAid and its volunteers helped re-establish fencing at the Estate and across the entire island. During this period, Yale and Jacques were joined by winemakers from the mainland in planning the way forward. Mike Brown headed the team from McLaren Vale's Gemtree Wines, Toby Bekkers (who was involved in the original vineyard planting) of the eponymous Bekkers Wines, and Martin Shaw led the Shaw + Smith team - a five red-star gathering if ever there was one. Jacques and Yale are committed to bringing The Islander Estate back to what it was. Covid-19 restrictions have meant the cellar door has only been open two days a week for takeaways and produce, but the full wine range is available online. Half the island's land was not affected, and its amazing aquatic life of penguins, seals and walrus attest to the fact that the Southern Ocean has no other land falls as you travel south and reach the Antarctic. Kangaroo Island's isolation has so far kept Covid-19 off the island. The Jobkeeper program has helped, and grants from the South Australian government have kept a sense of purpose alive. At the time of print, South Australia was loosening some controls, and the prospect of some tourist income is gaining weight. The paradox is the high percentage of aged residents on the island, and limited medical resources to deal with any Covid-19 outbreak. The famous Malcolm Fraser dictum that life wasn't meant to be easy rings with clarity in this phoenix. ●

3 WINES TO TRY

Tasted by Halliday Wine Companion tasting team member **Jeni Port**.



2018 The Islander Estate Vineyards The Wally White Kangaroo Island Semillon, \$38

Semillon on Kangaroo Island clearly has a future. The Wally White responds to the terroir with generosity, offering up an intriguing complexity that attacks all the senses. Eye-catching medium-deep yellow in hue. Aromas of honeysuckle, beeswax and baked pear. Waves of flavour ride the mouth, concentrated, intense with abiding texture and acidity. As a 2yo it comes across as developed, but the acidity ensures a long life. // 13.5% ALC. DRINK TO 2027.



2019 The Islander Estate Vineyards Old Rowley, \$38

A brilliant purple sheen is an enticing introduction to this smart, young shiraz grenache. Softness is the key here together with a discreet, still-emerging personality. It has a way to go. Pepper, spice, blackberries and red earth aromas. Deliciously ripe palate with dark cherry, black fruits and grenache violets and confection. Tannins are firm. Bottle age is a must. // 14% ALC. DRINK TO 2032.



2019 The Islander Estate Vineyards Sangiovese, \$28

In so many ways, The Islander produces wines that are more European than Australian. Note the degree of savouriness in its wines, and the use of fruit as a conduit for complexity and not necessarily an end in itself. Sangiovese is such a wine. Fragrant with black cherries, capers, anise, bitter chocolate. It runs smooth across the palate, supple oak playing its part and imparting sweet mocha. Cherry pip, chalky tannins still melding. // 14% ALC. DRINK TO 2030.