

The year of the drought we had to have ...

REFLECT on 2006? You gotta be kidding. This was the year the puddle dried out. The year the Narcissus we call Australia was left gazing at the cracked earth where once shimmered its vainglorious reflection.

We should be deeply grateful for this drought. Nothing short of its brutality could have shaken us into our newfound awareness of the warming, drying Earth. Politicians, farmers, drinkers, firemen, winemakers, tourism operators – the whole damned mob of us has suddenly had to look the stark dusty future in the face. Doesn't really matter whether we're to blame for the new heat, or whether our planet just up and did it by itself. The reality is that we're going to have to approach our future with a lot more ingenuity, honesty and intelligence if we're expecting one at all.

So, top of my list of important bits of 2006 is a sort of collective gong to the winemakers of McLaren Vale, whose pale green tinge this year went positively, irreversibly, deeply verdant. I know of no wine-producing district on Earth whose environmental management and planning is more determined or enlightened. The huge move to organic and biodynamic vineyard management – led by the likes of Paxton, Clappis, and Gemtree – is one thing, but the reforesting, the restoration of the creek lines, the whole buzz of the place leaves the other wine regions scrambling in the dust. Literally.



The next really big thing was the continuing concentration of the most boring industrial wines in the two mega-chains, Woolworths and Coles. You want cheap? You want bulk? You want mindless recreational alcohol for self-medication? Go no further. These two will sort you out.

They are absolutely, utterly reliable. And their undying alliance with our biggest wine region, the Murray Valley, proves that hubris itself can still be a growth industry.

Thoroughly heartening is the survival of Penfolds, the world's biggest boutique winery. Head winning pinot. Mt Bera is the star newcomer, slotting in beautifully beside Penfolds Cellar Reserve and the stunners from Steve George at Ashton Hills.

Mt Bera also cleans up in the Bordeaux varieties. Its cabernet



McLaren Vale ... enlightened environmental planning. Right: Winemaker Peter Gago

and merlot are as good as it gets. For shiraz, it's Wayne Thomas' new Bushing King wine, followed neatly by Gemtree's Uncut. Lazy Ballerina made the best shiraz viognier – by far – and Greenock Creek killed all the grenache in the world with the mind-numbingly delicious 2005.

Speaking grenache, Peter Fraser of Yangara enters the front row of Saints for the enormous bush vine vineyards he's putting in

the Blewett Springs Sands where merlot and cabernet once tried to grow. Try one hundred acres.

But winemaker of the year? It's gotta be John Hood, boss brewer under Dr Tim Cooper at Coopers. Okay, it's not wine, but there'd be bugger all fine wine made in South Australia if the winemakers didn't have a Coopers cloudy within reach, especially in the teeth of a drought like this.



After many years of trial and tribulation, yeast wars, lawyers and marauding fountain-pen men, the local family brewery has never looked better, and Coopers beers have never tasted so good.

Have much fun over the break, but don't kill me on the road.