

Tumbarumba tasted by Jancis Robinson



A cool-climate, bushfire-burnt Australian wine region that deserves to be better known.

Tumbarumba in the foothills of the Australian Alps in the south of New South Wales (see [this map](#)) suffered particularly badly from the recent [awful Australian bushfires](#), which, in a roundabout way, resulted in my being able to discover its wines, as I will explain on Saturday. The *Tumbarumba Times* picture above shows just how many fire trucks were needed in the region at the beginning of this year. The local paper also published this picture of a Pinot Meunier in the Courabyra vineyard after the Dunns Road fires on New Year's Eve.



The discovery of 100% Tumbarumba wines was well worth making. Previously I had come across Tumbarumba fruit only as an ingredient in some of Australia's most ambitious Chardonnays from the big companies: Penfolds Yattarna and Eileen Hardy. But below are tasting notes on 33 all-Tumbarumba wines made by some of the region's best producers.

As can often be the way in Australia, many of these producers are based outside Tumbarumba, or the wines are the produce of local growers who send their fruit outside the region to be vinified. I asked Alex McKay, who was for long Hardys man in charge of Tumbarumba grape-sourcing and now makes Collector Wines, for details. These are the local wine-producing growers with details:

- **Coppabella** – Made at First Creek Wines in Pokolbin in the Hunter Valley, with Samantha Connew as consulting winemaker. Jason Brown has reinvigorated the old Tralee vineyard to produce Coppabella wine.
- **Courabyra** – The 2001 sparkling wine I enthuse about below was made by Ed Carr. In the last 10 years, Ed's protégé Peta Baverstock has been making the sparkling wines. They are whole-bunch pressed in the Canberra District and then made at Kilchurn in Macedon. Alex McKay makes the estimable Courabyra table wines in the Canberra District.
- **Johansen** – Various winemakers have made these wines including Greg Gallagher, Fiona Wholohan, Bryan Martin all from the Canberra District, and Simon Killeen in Beechworth.

- **Mount Tumbarumba Vineyards** label **On The Fly** – Made by Alex McKay in the Canberra District.
- **Obsession** – Made by Adrian Brayne at Brayne Estate in Tumbarumba.

I was sent these wines by Bill Mason, the owner of **Kosciuszko Wines**, an operation established by Chris Thomas, who moved to Tumbarumba in 2005 to establish Tumbarumba Grape Processors, the first winery in the region processing fruit from a range of local growers. Thomas has since retired and moved back to South Australia. Kosciuszko, named after Australia's highest mountain nearby, buys fruit from one of the region's oldest vineyards, Juliet Cullen's Excelsior Peak vineyard, and the wine is made by Robert Bruno at his Toorak winery in Riverina.

Find out more about the producers in [this section](#) of the excellent website of the Tumbarumba Vignerons Association.

In the tasting notes below, thanks to information supplied by Bill Mason, I have given details of which vineyard(s) supplied which wine and their elevations – which vary from around 500 to over 800 m (1,640–2,625 ft), though the informative [Tumbarumba Vignerons Association website](#) says there are vineyards as low as 300 m. Perhaps their wines didn't make the cut for the shipment to me in London.

The vineyards that supplied the 33 wines I tasted are listed below in descending order of elevation:

VINEYARD	ELEVATION
Obsession	810 m
Cribbin	810 m
Mount Tumbarumba	755 m
Reeve Estate	750 m

Johansen	745 m
Courabyra	680 m
Barclay	680 m
Excelsior Park	630 m
David Lyons	610 m
Coppabella	580 m
Tumbarumba Wines Escape	560 m
Minutello	550 m
Maragle	400 m

The picture below, taken by drone by Johansen, is of their vineyard after the fires.



I'm also indebted to Peter Gago of Penfolds, who were instrumental in the development of the region in the 1990s. He shared the Penfolds' official profile of Tumbarumba:

The first vines were established at Tumbarumba in 1982 by Ian Cowell and a year later by Frank Minutello at Tooma in the Maragle Valley, 18 kilometres (11 miles) south-east of Tumbarumba. The pace of development was slow between 1983 and 1992, and at the end of the decade eight vineyards had been established with a total area of 78 hectares (193 acres).

The ability of the region to produce table wine (as opposed to sparkling wine) is dependent on two variables: seasonal conditions and site altitude. The margin for error is low and the need for enhanced viticultural management high.

Tumbarumba's climate is cool but no more so on this measure than that of the Yarra Valley, and it is warmer, for example, than that of Macedon Ranges in central Victoria or Henty in south-western Victoria. Moreover, there are also a number of other, mutually counterbalancing factors: high sunshine hours with brilliant light, cold summer nights and a late start to the growing season. Frost is an ever-present viticultural threat and its presence dictates the necessity for careful site selection and management. Night-time temperature inversion, the propensity of cold air to sink and warm air to rise, can be tricky, but elevation is a counterbalancing and significant factor

in determining varietal choice. The early autumn seasonal break can also pose problems. Increasingly, fire-risk and smoke now pose a problem ...

These are typical high mountain soils, derived from decomposed granite and basalt, with a typically gritty and granular texture. The choice of viticultural site is chiefly determined by aspect (north and northeast-facing preferred, south-facing nigh on impossible) and slope (sufficiently steep to promote good air drainage at night and thus minimise the risk of frost).

Tumbarumba key statistics

CLIMATE AND HARVEST

Altitude	300–800 m
Annual rainfall	982 mm
Growing season rainfall	489 mm
Mean January temperature	20.15 °C (68.3 °F)
Heat degree days (October to April)	1264 (cut off at 19 °C/66 °F)
Relative humidity (October to April)	average 43% at 3 pm
Harvest	early March to late April

This should in theory be an attractive region to visit. There's a cellar door and restaurant at Courabyra vineyard and other cellar doors operated by Johansen, Tumbarumba Wine Escape and Obsession but this last was virtually wiped out by the fires and is in the process of reconstruction. One small, literal, green shoot of recovery was seen below on a burnt vine in the Johansen vineyard on 18 January, less than three weeks after the terrible fires.



These 33 wines are grouped into sparkling wines, Chardonnays, aromatic whites, two rosés, and reds, mainly Pinot Noirs. Within these groups they are shown in declining score order but you can change this.

Sparkling

Courabyra, 805 2011 Tumbarumba

A blend of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier from their own vineyard at 680 m. Sparkling wine specialist Ed Carr made this very special bottling.

Deep straw and a steady bead. Rich, heavy nose with masses of evolution. Creamy texture and lots of luscious fruit. Reminds me of some very mature halves of Duval Leroy I once bought in quantity. The polar opposite of zero dosage grower's champagne but offering lots of character and pleasure. Beautifully balanced.

13%

Drink

2017 – 2022

17

Hungerford Hill, Dalliance 2017 Tumbarumba

Pinot Meunier, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay blend from the Revee estate at 750 m. Traditional method.

Pale straw with a steady stream of tiny bubbles. A tiny bit green and raw on the nose. And perceptible dosage on the front palate. Clean, zesty fruit and well made but I wouldn't have minded a bit more time on tirage. Slightly short.

12.5%

Drink

2021 – 2023

15.5

Chardonnay

Kosciuszko Chardonnay 2018 Tumbarumba

Wine producer named after Australia's highest mountain in the nearby Snowy Mountains. Made from grapes in the 630 m Excelsior Peak vineyard planted on granite sandy loam with a north-west aspect, one of the oldest in the region. The wines are made by Robert Bruno at his Toorak Winery in Leeton, Riverina.

Real tension and purity on the nose. Really rather beautiful. Lovely satiny texture and great, exciting play between the fruit and acidity. I'd love to taste this blind alongside a fine Puligny. Some slight chewiness on the end suggests a long life. A wine with a beginning, middle and end.

12.5%

Drink

2020 – 2026

17.5

Mada Chardonnay 2019 Tumbarumba

Grown by the Johansen family at 745 m. Canberra address on the label. This new brand belongs to young Kiwi Hamish Young, who used to make the Eden Road wines. He uses many fashionable techniques such as skin contact,

concrete fermenters, ceramic eggs and large format oak.

Lightly reductive, minerally nose. A really satisfying mouthful for such a young wine. Like a cross between ground stones and lime marmalade. Crystalline, delicate but already approachable. So friendly!

13%

Drink

2020 – 2024

17

Coppabella, Sirius Chardonnay 2017 Tumbarumba

From their own vineyard at 580 m. Fruit used to go into Penfolds Yattarna. Chilled, whole-bunch grapes pressed to French oak (30% new) for fermentation, followed by 11 months maturation. Solids are kept with the free-run juice for added complexity. 2,600 bottles made.

Pretty smart, very lifted, delicate nose. Great edge of acidity. Yet mouth-filling. Long. Very Australian somehow but that certainly isn't a bad thing. Neat and jewelly. Quite a core of bright fruit.

12.5%

Drink

2019 – 2025

AU\$60 at the winery

17

Collector Wines, Tiger Tiger Chardonnay 2017 Tumbarumba

Cribbin vineyard at 810 m – highest of the lot in Tumbarumba? Based in Collector, NSW.

Almost colourless. Lightly reductive, very zesty nose. Mmm. Really fills the palate with ripe, friendly fruit but has the drive and zest to keep it all racy. There has been a little evolution already. Quite long.

12.9%

Drink

2019 – 2024

17

Collector Wines, Tiger Tiger Chardonnay 2016 Tumbarumba

From Cribbin vineyard at 810 m. Very minimal typographical labels.

Almost colourless. More obviously struck match than the 2017. Chiselled

fruit with, again, very fine, ripe fruit on the mid palate. Very mineral and pleasing. Youthful for a four-year-old wine. But not quite as much focus as the 2017.

12.9%

Drink

2018 – 2022

17

Charles Sturt University Chardonnay 2019 Tumbarumba

Barclay vineyard at 680 m. Aged for eight months in one- and two-year-old French oak on lees with monthly stirring. Back-label slogan from this offering from one of Australia's leading wine faculties: Making wine. Making winemakers.

Lively, leesy, limey nose. Whistle clean. Lots of acidity to keep it fresh. I'd keep this a little while as I'm sure it will develop beautifully in bottle. A good aperitif of accompaniment to fresh fish. Oysters too?

13.5%

Drink

2021 – 2025

16.5 +

Clonakilla Chardonnay 2018 Tumbarumba

Like Mada, made from the Johansen vineyard at 745 m by Canberra's most famous wine producer.

Greenish highlights on pale straw. Nose is a little heftier than the Mada Chardonnay 2019. Very juicy and salivatory. Lemon-sherbet notes.

Substantial wine that could already be enjoyed with a wide range of foods – even quite emphatic ones.

13%

Drink

2019 – 2023

16.5

Nick O'Leary Chardonnay 2018 Tumbarumba

Blend of fruit from the 680 m Barclay vineyard and the 550 m Minutello vineyard.

Powerful struck-match aroma plus a very slight sweatiness on the nose. Lots

to enjoy here. Fruit plus precision. Nicely chiselled. Very contained. Though not amazingly long. Usefully low alcohol?

12%

Drink

2020 – 2023

16.5

Even Keel Chardonnay 2018 Tumbarumba

This is a label belonging to Polperro of Margaret River. Fruit from Courabyra vineyard at 680 m. The fruit is hand-picked and whole-bunch pressed using a gentle champagne press cycle. No enzymes or sulphur are used at the press tray and the juice is oxidatively handled to get rid of oxidative enzymes early on in the winemaking process. The wine is left at ambient or if needed chilled to 15 °C and transferred to old French oak barrels with full solids and minimal sulphur is added. The wine is allowed to ferment using ambient yeast and left unsulphured until the following summer when in most cases the wine completes full malolactic conversion. A minimal amount of sulphur is added and the wine is left in barrel for a total of 10 months, then it is racked off gross lees and transferred to tank. The resulting wine is bottled using no fining and minimal filtration.

Pale with greenish highlights. Very light nose. Fresh and light. Precise. Dry, smoky finish.

12.6%

Drink

2019 – 2023

AU\$30 from Polperro in WA

16.5

McWilliams, 842 Chardonnay 2015 Tumbarumba

McWilliams' bemedalled flagship Chardonnay designed for three to five years' bottle maturation. Fruit from Johansen vineyard at 745 m.

Lightly toasty nose almost suggests Hunter white more than Tumbarumba – a yeast thing? Long, substantial with crispness and great structure. I can easily see why this did so well in the all-important wine shows in Australia. Long and satisfying though not as refined as the Kosciuszko 2018 Chardonnay.

13%

Drink
2018 – 2022

16.5

Eden Road Chardonnay 2018 Tumbarumba

Murrumbateman producer. 70% from Courabyra vineyard at 680 m and 30% from Maragle at 400 m. Aged for 12 months in French barriques, 30% new. Big and bold on the nose – even rich! Sweet, flattering start but not quite the elegance of some. Lightly smoky. An easy drink already.

13.5%

Drink
2019 – 2022

16

Coppabella, The Crest Chardonnay 2018 Tumbarumba

From Coppabella's own vineyard at 580 m. Whole-bunch pressed straight to barrel (a combination of barriques and puncheons of which 30% were new). The wine had zero malolactic fermentation with some partial bâtonnage. Lightly smoky nose with a green vegy nose. Rather loose on the palate. Easy to like and very slightly cheesy. Bone dry, lightly chewy finish.

13.5%

Drink
2019 – 2022
AU\$35 from the winery

16

Mount Tumbarumba Vineyard, On the Fly Chardonnay 2018 Tumbarumba

From Mount Tumbarumba's own vineyard at 755 m. Light lemon sherbet nose. Then round and almost fat. I would not have guessed this wine was made from one of the highest vineyards. Was the fruit picked relatively late? Just a bit sweet and astringent. But in other company it might look fresher.

13.7%

Drink
2019 – 2022

16

Hungerford Hill, 50th Anniversary Chardonnay 2017 Tumbarumba

Hunter Valley winery buys fruit from Revee Estate at 750 m. 3,950 bottles made.

Light, pungent nose. And a slight lack of fruit charm on the mid palate. Seems a little more winery- than vineyard-dominated. Lightly astringent finish.

13.5%

Drink

2019 – 2022

16

Penfolds, Bin 311 Chardonnay 2016 Tumbarumba

Blend of fruit from Grant vineyard at 600m, Barclay at 680 m and Johansen at 745 m.

Not quite as pure and expressive on the nose as some of the single-vineyard offerings from the locals. Notably high acidity – acidified? Not as pure as some with quite a bit of astringency on the end. Suffers a bit from comparison with local efforts.

12.5%

Drink

2021 – 2025

16

Aromatics whites

Helm Riesling 2016 Tumbarumba

From Juliet Cullen's Excelsior Peak vineyard at 630 m. Geisenheim clone 110 on SO4 rootstock. Marked as dry on the Riesling sweetness scale on the back label.

Lemon-sherbet nose. Very pure and tastes absolutely bone dry but I'm glad there's just a tiny bit of residual to counterbalance that pretty high acidity. Should age well. Quite high extract as well as the acidity.

11%

Drink
2020 – 2028
AU\$30 RRP

16.5 +

Helm Riesling 2015 Tumbarumba

From Juliet Cullen's Excelsior Peak vineyard at 630 m, cane pruned. Geisenheim 110 clone on SO4 rootstock. Gold medal Canberra wine show.
This has really benefited from an extra year in bottle over the 2016. Really juicy lime-juice character with a clean finish. Far from heavy. Light and lively. Similar structure to a Hunter Semillon. Very slightly chewy end. Hot-day cooler with intrigue?

11%

Drink
2018 – 2025
AU\$26 RRP

16.5

Mount Tumbarumba Vineyard, On the Fly Pinot Gris 2018 Tumbarumba

From their own vineyard at 755 m.
There seems to be some good Pinot Gris plant material in Tumbarumba. Really mouth-filling but definitely at peak now. Just off dry but very obviously varietal. Well balanced and quite punchy. No shortage of personality.

12.9%

Drink
2018 – 2020

16.5

Hungerford Hill Pinot Gris 2019 Tumbarumba

From David Lyons vineyard at 610 m. Dark-green flute bottle.
Very slight pinkish hue on the mid honey colour. Broad, pretty rich nose. Then crisp acidity and a little savoury note on the end. Nice, bone-dry wine with no shortage of very slightly tropical fruit. This would be good with food. Nice tension (thanks to a bit of dissolved carbon dioxide?).

13.5%
Drink
2020 – 2022

16.5

Nick O'Leary Riesling 2016 Tumbarumba

From Cribbin vineyard at 815 m.

This really smells of Australian Riesling! All taut and muscular without the obvious fruit of a German example. Pure, minerally and bone dry. Rather like a Clare example but with a little less alcohol. Could be just the job as a cooler on a hot day. No excessive evolution on the nose but good to drink now. Was it unpalatably tart in youth?

12%
Drink
2019 – 2023

16

Courabyra, 1 of 11 Grüner Veltliner 2019 Tumbarumba

From their own vineyard at 680 m.

Rather welcome breadth of fruit after tasting a run of tight Tumbarumba Rieslings! Very pure and fruity. Absolutely true to variety. Lovely and clean. No mucking about in the winery. Very promising. Though presumably as the vines age, the wine will take on more concentration.

12.4%
Drink
2019 – 2021
AU\$26 RRP

16

Tumbarumba Wines Escape Pinot Grigio 2019 Tumbarumba

From their own vineyard at 560 m described as '100% family owned and run. Made with love, pure mountain air (and grapes).'

Quite broad and spicy on the nose. Lots of fruit but not quite as much tension and excitement as the Hungerford Hill Pinot Gris 2019. Good balance between fruit and acid.

13.6%
Drink

2019 – 2021

16

Rosés

Mount Tumbarumba Vineyard, On the Fly 2018 Tumbarumba

From their own vineyard at 755 m. Pinot Noir is acknowledged on the back label.

Very pale salmon. Very clean nose with a light Pinot perfume. Mouth-filling broad fruit. Really rather impressive. Hint of smokiness. Not the most complex wine but lots of charm and easy to appreciate. Quite long. The name refers to fly fishing and there's a watercolour of a salmon(?) on the front label. Good stuff. Still drinking well at two years.

12.6%

Drink

2019 – 2021

16

McWilliams, 480 2019 Tumbarumba

From a mix of vineyards averaging 480m elevation, this wine was garlanded with a trophy at the Cool Climate Wine Show and a gold at the Rutherglen Wine Show. This is almost certainly Pinot Noir but no grape is specified on the label.

Pale orangey pink. Smells a little sweet and simple. Then awfully tart and fruitless on the end. Perhaps it is past its best already? May have been delightful a few months ago...

13%

Drink

2019 – 2019

15

Reds

Obsession Pinot Noir 2018 Tumbarumba

From Obsession's own vineyard at 810 m.

Pale garnet colour. Quite sweet, ripe red-cherry fruit on the nose. Very crisp

and precise with full, charming fruit on the mid palate and a little bite of vivacity on the finish. Very pretty and well balanced indeed. More refreshing and savoury than many of its peers. Maybe the oak is very slightly overdone for some tastes but the fruit quality with its minerally notes is most impressive. Lovely freshness.

13.3%

Drink

2020 – 2027

17

Kosciuszko Pinot Noir 2018 Tumbarumba

From Judith Cullen's Excelsior Peak vineyard at 630 m on granite sandy loam soils with a north-west aspect.

Quite a deep, nuanced garnet colour. Complex, savoury nose suggests a wine that is more than two years old. Very pleasing balance of fruit, acidity and light tannins. A little more body than a wine that would be described as pretty. Finishes dry and quite savoury. A wine I shall take to the dining table for more trials. Lightly grainy tannins suggests it will have quite a long life.

13.5%

Drink

2020 – 2028

16.5 +

Eden Road Pinot Noir 2018 Tumbarumba

From the Courabyra vineyard at 680 m.

Pale, slightly rusty red. Very pale rim. A certain sweetness of fruit on the nose. And sweet crystallised violets on the front palate, light weight (despite the alcohol) and very slightly sickly but with a clean, vital finish which saves the whole thing. Already quite evolved, and fun to drink now.

14%

Drink

2019 – 2024

16.5

Hungerford Hill, Reveal Vineyard Pinot Noir 2018 Tumbarumba

One of the few Tumbarumba wines to put the name of the vineyard in big letters on the front label. The Reveal vineyard is at 750 m and is described on

the back label as the oldest in the region. The MV clone was planted in 1981 and is grown on deep red loam. This was picked on 11 March, relatively late. Light garnet colour. Juicy, fresh, lightly toasty clean fruit on the nose. Green ferny freshness on the palate. Lively, well-balanced wine. Already seems quite ready to drink. Gets the saliva flowing. Very light tannins on the quite persistent finish suggest there is some potential for ageing too.

13.5%

Drink

2020 – 2026

16.5

McWilliams, Single Vineyard Pinot Noir 2018 Tumbarumba

From the Revee vineyard at 750 m. The modest message on the label: 'Situated at the southern end of Courabyra Road, a combination of the MV6 block's easterly aspect, dry grown vineyard, granite-based soils and vine age – delivers a ripe, small-berried Pinot Noir – the best in the region.' Just 142 cases made.

Bright pale crimson. Mild, ripe nose. Rather elevated acidity on the palate and a little more tannic than most of its peers. Seems to have been made with a slightly heavier hand than some but it's certainly a substantial mouthful.

14%

Drink

2021 – 2025

16 +

Linear Pinot Noir 2019 Tumbarumba

From the Barclay vineyard at 680 m. Nice typography tells us 'small batch, hand harvested, pigeage in open fermenters, aged in French oak'.

Pale raspberry red. Pretty convincing Pinot aromas – fully ripe but not overripe. But on the palate it's pretty searingly tart. You would definitely need some food with this. Perhaps it will round out in bottle. I'd wait before opening.

13.2%

Drink

2022 – 2026

16 +

Ravensworth, Charlie Foxtrot Gamay 2015 Tumbarumba

From the Johansen vineyard at 745 m. Made beaujolais style by carbonic maceration. I wonder why this is so much older than the Pinot Noirs from Tumbarumba in this selection? Beautiful label with ancient lithographs.
Fruit, chew and acidity and a little bit dried out on the end. I suspect this may have seen better days. But there is some life left and I'd forgive a lot for that label.

12.5%

Drink

2016 – 2019