

How this winemaker sold his Aussie sparklings to 15 countries

The Master of Wine experimented until he could make “clean, pure and fruity” sparkling wines under the Astro Pop and Piggy Pop labels. They’re now a hit in 15 countries.



In his element: Tim Wildman among grapes with the right combination of higher acidity and lower pH.

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Tim Wildman has seen more than his fair share of funky wines. As a buyer for UK-based specialist natural wine importer Les Caves de Pyrene, he spent years immersed in the world of cloudy sulphur-free skinsy whites, and murky pétillant naturels.

To some in that world, a touch of funkiness is a badge of honour. But it doesn't have to be: Wildman maintains that "natural" and "sulphur-free" don't automatically mean a wine has to be feral.



Wildman's pet-nats are made from grapes sourced in McLaren Vale, South Australia. Facebook

"In fact," says the English-born Master of Wine, "the *best* natural wines are wonderfully clean and pure and fruity because they're made with such care and precision."

So, a decade ago, when he moved to Australia and decided to make and sell his own pet-nat, he knew that he wanted it to be fun, fruity – and fault-free.

Wildman had spent a lot of time here over the years, on buying trips and leading groups of wine professionals on tours with his James Busby Travel business. Through his contacts, he bought a tonne of grenache grapes from McLaren Vale, fermented them in a mate's shed, bottled the wine before it had finished fermenting, and started selling the resulting fizzy booze under the name Astro Bunny (the label features a cartoon of a stoned rabbit that Wildman saw pasted on the side of a bin in inner-city Melbourne).



Cheers to good business sense. “If you’re committed to a brand for the long term, it makes sense to spread the risk” through exports, says Wildman.

It was well-received, so the next year he decided to make some more. And this time, he settled on a more complex blend: early picked white Italian varieties such as vermentino and fiano, mixed with some red grapes such as nero d’avola, and a splash of super-aromatic muscat gordo blanco, sourced from the Riverland, for perfume.

He then added another pet-nat to the range, called Piggy Pop. This style has evolved over the years but is now the mirror image of Astro Bunny: where the latter is an amber-coloured blend of 70 per cent white grapes and 30 per cent red, the former is the opposite mix, 70 per cent red to 30 per cent white.

Wildman realised it was important to use Italian grape varieties (and, in more recent vintages, other alternative European grapes such as grüner veltliner and verdejo) because these have the right combination of higher acidity and lower pH compared to, say, chardonnay or shiraz. And that’s important if you’re not adding any sulphur dioxide, which you can’t do if you want the wine to keep fermenting in the bottle.

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“Working without sulphur can lead to a lot of unwanted, unexpected outcomes and faults,” he says. “But having that low pH in the juice gives you a big head start on avoiding those problems.”

Unlike most Australian pet-nats, which are made in small batches – often as a side-line to the winemaker’s main range – and sold locally through bars and restaurants, Wildman has built his pet-nat-exclusive business to around 3000 cases. He now exports to 15 countries, from Canada to Sweden to Taiwan.



Wildman, living up to his name, with a barrel of his South Australian pet-nat.

Export has always been an important part of the Australian pet-nat plan. “It’s just good business sense,” he says. “It’s all very well being strong in your own backyard but if you’re committed to a brand for the long term, it makes sense to spread the risk.”

His latest project, though – an English pet-nat – is currently being produced in such tiny quantities (more like 150 cases) it’s unlikely to be exported any time soon.

After Wildman returned to the UK to live in 2018 (he still travels here a few times a year, during vintage to harvest grapes for Astro Bunny and Piggy Pop, and for sales trips), he started considering an English version of the style that was doing so well for him Down Under.



Wildman back in England at a 'lost vineyard' he uncovered in Okehampton, West Devon.

As I've written here recently, there has been a [massive boom in vineyard planting](#) over the last couple of decades in the UK. But as Wildman says, 99 per cent of that has been chardonnay and pinot noir, for bottle-matured, traditional-method fizz. "And if you want to make a fruity, aromatic, fun pet-nat, you're probably not going to achieve that with pinot and chardonnay grown in a cold climate."

Wildman knew, though, that in the early days of the modern UK wine industry, in the late 1960s, '70s and '80s, the mostly-tiny-scale amateur wannabe vigneron didn't plant chardonnay and pinot to make English "champagne".

They planted cold-climate-adapted, aromatic German varieties – such as madeleine angevine and reichensteiner and schönberger – to make

English “hock” and English “liebfraumilch” because those were the popular wine styles of the day.

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“I thought, I could use *those* varieties to make a fruity pet-nat,” he says.

Wildman had a mate who used to work for a body called the UK Wine Standards Board and who, incredibly, still had spreadsheets listing what varieties had been planted in what postcodes and when.

So, during the COVID-19 lockdowns (with travel to Australia out of the question), Wildman spent months, first on Google maps trying to find out whether these tiny pockets of vines still existed, then driving around the country, peering over hedges, walking up driveways, asking if he could buy some grapes.

Eventually, he found two vineyards, one in Kent, one in Herefordshire, that were still growing these old German grapes commercially. And in 2021 he made his first pet-nat under the Lost in a Field label using fruit from these two vineyards, as well as minuscule quantities of grapes from five other forgotten and neglected patches of mostly German vines in England and Wales – vines that had been derided in the '80s and relegated to the dustbin of history.



Madeleine Angevine from Kent going through a “traditional Coquard wooden basket press, manufactured c.1970, liberated from a cellar in Champagne and relocated to Dorset, England”, in Wildman’s words. Facebook

To build a bit of hype around the project, Wildman founded the [Lost Vineyard Preservation Society](#) – members go on camping trips to rejuvenate old vines and organise harvest tea parties – and decided to call these German grapes “heritage varieties”.

“The second you put the word heritage in front of something everything changes,” he says. “I had journalists and other Masters of Wine emailing me, saying, ‘I’ve heard about these heritage varieties, Tim, what’s all this?’ ”

Unfortunately, the plan backfired: the vineyard owners in Kent were so inspired by all this talk of “heritage” grapes and the hype surrounding the first Lost in a Field pet-nat that they wouldn’t sell him fruit the next year, keeping it to make their own wine instead.

He’s become a victim of his own success.

Pet-nat adventures



2022 Wildman Astro Bunny Pet-Nat [South Australia]

This bold young pet-nat tastes a little unresolved at present: the spice and floral aromatics of the zibibbo are just beginning to emerge from the savoury, chewy, crispness of the vermentino and grüner. It’s a good, fun drink, but I think a few months more in the bottle will see the

flavours meld and mellow. Mad, really, suggesting you “cellar” a pet-nat (surely the very definition of a “drink-now” wine), but seriously, I think this will get better with some more time spent resting in a cool dark place. **\$35**

2022 Wildman Piggy Pop Pet-Nat [South Australia]

This pet-nat, on the other hand, is absolutely singing right now: it’s bursting with bright cherry and spice and raspberry flavours, as though the aromatic white grapes arneis and zibibbo are holding the snappy, juicy red grapes nero d’avola and mataro up to your face, urging you to take a refreshing mouthful. So fresh and delicious. **\$35**