

PETER FULLER

peter.fuller@awbm.com.au



THE LAST GOLDEN GOOSE



Politicians are a blinkered lot. In November Tasmanian Premier David Bartlett was out of the starting gates quicker than American, when he leapt on the unfortunate backs of 6,000 Murray Darling Basin growers grappling with an uncertain future.

He promptly announced a \$400 million water scheme, partly funded by Federal taxpayers, which promises to deliver 188,900 megalitres of comparatively cheap irrigation water at 95% reliability for at least 100 years to horticultural and agricultural regions in Tassie.

With the forest industry in crisis, Bartlett is boasting that the flood of irrigation water will help add \$1 billion in value to each of the state's five key primary industries – horticulture, dairy, red meat, aquaculture and of course wine – in the next decade.

While mainland winemakers are still stamping out the last embers of the catastrophic late 1990s wine boom fuelled directly by such political brinkmanship, someone needs to warn the Tasmania Government not to apply the cattle prod too quickly to this nicely manageable 7,000 odd tonnes of super premium fruit.

The potential offered by this most southern of our wine regions – cool climate elegance, a specialisation in sparkling as well as Pinot, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay table wines, ample land for expansion, the highest average grape price in the country of \$2,520/tonne, not to mention water – must have been in the back of Ross Brown's mind when his company paid \$32.5 million for Tamar Ridge. It has also not been lost on Yalumba, Foster's and others.

The trick will be how to manage the growth so that demand is not exceeded by supply – something a lot of wine executives failed to consider in 1996.

An encouraging sign is the guidance

offered by Wine Tasmania in actively building bridges between the Government's enthusiastic economic advisers and future wine industry investors.

Unlike the glowing scenarios painted in *Strategy 2025* (no criticisms intended, I was part of it) Wine Tasmania's investor checklist raises important pre-investment considerations. There is a bit too much emphasis on viticulture (mention of life on the land remains a drug to seachange prone city slickers) but there are also very useful discussions on infrastructure, labour, establishment costs, business planning and understanding market channels.

Naturally I think there should be some more 'hammer between the eyes' advice on how badly many wine companies have performed in recent years and how the world needs another bottle of Australian Sauvignon Blanc like it needs a second season *Junior MasterChef*.

Nevertheless it is a great start and shows some of the contemporary thinking going on around 42° South.

As chief executive officer of Wine Tasmania, Sheralee Davies is one of the best young wine administrators in the country, having been blooded at the Winemakers' Federation and Constellation. She seems to have a tight grip on government enthusiasm to grow Tasmanian wine while acknowledging the enormous potential of a place the size of the UK with 10 times the natural attractions and assets.

We can only hope that she is listened to by vote-hungry MPs from either side.

The case for the protection of Tasmania – the last golden goose of Australian wine – is something the whole industry must take an interest in. Like an embryo of an endangered species, if carefully nurtured, its image might just lead all of us out of the wilderness.