

THE AUSTRALIAN

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WISH

RAISE A GLASS

Nicky Oatley steps into her winemaking era

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W.DRINK



Getting personal Nicky Oatley's latest project – a pinot noir from Whipbird and NOW's cabernet franc and chenin blanc.

ANSWERING THE CALL

Her family blazed a trail in Australian winemaking. Now Nicky Oatley is making noise of her own, partnering with vigneron Larry Cherubino on modern wines with a story to tell.

By WILL LENNOX

Wine, like families, tends to ferment into stories. Some are robust and unyielding, others soft and forgettable, but the Oatleys have always produced vintages of a particular character – bold, confident, slightly sunburnt, and with the sort of stamina that makes other dynasties look like table grapes. For Nicky Oatley, the story of Whipbird began not in a vineyard but in a whistle: a curious, five-note family call first traded between her grandfather Bob and his father Geoffrey, echoing the cry of the native whiplbird.

“It’s a five-note whistle that was passed down for basically 100 years of my family ... from my dad’s grandfather Geoffrey, to my grandfather, to Dad, to me, and now to my daughter Eva,” Oatley says. “I always remember walking the vineyard with Dad and he would whistle if he was a couple of rows over. Now I use it when I’m picking Eva up from preschool so she knows I’m there.”

With the help of celebrated winemaker Larry Cherubino, Oatley has bottled that sound and its history. Whipbird is a wine that is at once inheritance and rebellion, a story of legacy and reinvention poured for a new generation.

The Oatleys are one of those Australian families who seem to pop up everywhere, like kangaroos in a vineyard. Business, sailing, philanthropy,

Hamilton Island, and of course, wine. At the centre was Bob Oatley, the entrepreneur and yachtsman who took Rosemount Estate to the world stage and after its much-publicised sale, later founded Robert Oatley Wines.

We meet Oatley and Cherubino sitting beneath the vaulted ceiling of Bennelong restaurant in Sydney Opera House. In a few hours, the duo will showcase some of their top wines to a hand-picked selection of Australia’s top sommeliers and wine merchants, who will taste first hand the fruits of this new venture.

“I’m constantly torn between continuing the legacy versus doing it my way,” Oatley admits. “I often actually think, ‘What would Popeye – my grandfather – do?’ I use him as a blueprint going forward, but I’ve now sort of changed tack a little bit. Look at what we’ve done, yes, but start a *new* path forward.”

Cherubino refers to the Oatleys as restless innovators. “When they were growing the wine business, they’d go off on tour around the world and come back full of inspiration. As far as innovation, particularly at that point in time, they were highly innovative. So I don’t think you’d have anything to worry about.”

Oatley managed the family business of Hamilton Island for nearly two decades. But the call of the winemaking business was always there

and she knew one day she’d rejoin the family amongst the vines.

The seed for Whipbird was sown on one of her trips west to visit Western Australia-based Cherubino, the winemaking director for Robert Oatley Wines. “We’ve always had brands built on the Oatley family – Robert Oatley, Wild Oats – and those brands talked to a much older generation,” she explains. “I saw an opportunity to talk to a younger generation.”

She laughs when she recalls her father’s strict warning before the trip: “No new projects, Nicky”. And yet, fate intervened. “Dad took a phone call out on the balcony and left Larry and I alone for five minutes. Larry goes, ‘So, what do you like to drink?’ I said, ‘Chenin’, and he said, ‘Cool’. We went on a rant about chenin for five minutes. Dad walked back in, everything seemed fine. Then the next day Larry calls me and says, ‘It’s been the best growing season for chenin in 20 years – do you want to do it?’. So much for no new projects.”

In addition to Whipbird, there is also its more serious sibling: NOW. (Nicole Oatley Wines). If Whipbird is the generational call across the vineyard, NOW. is the conversation at the head of the table.

This smaller stable begins with a chenin blanc and a cabernet franc, crafted in limited volumes



On the vine Nicky Oatley and winemaker Larry Cherubino have teamed up to create wines for the next generation of drinkers.

and aimed squarely at wine drinkers who want to linger over their nuance. They are unapologetically more expensive, with the intent that they belong in the hands of sommeliers and in the cellars of those who care as much about provenance as they do pleasure.

As much as Whipbird is propelled by a sense of rebellion, the NOW. wines are an indulgence to Oatley's own curiosity.

"We've only got a tiny bit of chenin left, and we're already debating whether to hold some back for a later release. I'm fascinated to see how these wines age," she says.

"The cab franc is on-trend – floral, perfumed, soft – but it's also timeless," adds Cherubino.

"At the end of the day, most wine now is reliable. What sets these apart is the degree of polish and the quality of fruit."

So what are the wines when you swirl them in the glass? For Cherubino, it's about a sense of place. "These are uniquely Western Australian. There are other people now playing with chenin [across Australia], but really the home is WA."

Whipbird wines are designed to feel polished but approachable. The range spans chardonnay, pinot gris, chenin blanc, as well as a pinot noir

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Larry Cherubino

and grenache blend for the reds. These are varietals chosen as much for their drinkability as their intrigue for younger drinkers. "The whole premise of this brand is that it's got to taste really good, but it's also got to be extremely good value," Oatley says. "We chose varietals that made sense commercially, but also added chenin and GSM [a grenache, syrah, and mourvèdre blend] for people who are more adventurous. To keep it interesting."

As for the NOW. set, both feel modern without chasing trends. The chenin is bright, with that textural grip you get from the WA terroir while the cabernet is sweetly perfumed, soft, not too bold in its oak and ultimately very drinkable.

Wine has always had a generational problem: a reputation for being hushed, elitist and a little too enamoured with itself. Whipbird addresses this without pandering. It's as comfortable on a sommelier's list as it is at a family dinner. NOW. plays into the evolution of the drinker, it won't isolate fans of Whipbird, but it's a noticeable cut above. Generational knowledge of drinking styles and patterns, played out in tiers.

As a winemaker with three children of his own, Cherubino has been thinking about the next wave of wine drinkers. "It's fairly early days ... launching a product is the easy part, it's how you evolve it over time that's the tricky part. And there's a generation coming through that isn't drinking wine. But at some point, everyone becomes interested in what they eat and drink and where it comes from. That's where this project matters," the lauded winemaker says.

Oatley puts it simply. "At the end of the day, it's producing great wine that people can enjoy, whether it's with friends or with food."

Both Oatley and Cherubino are clear eyed about what comes next. For Oatley, it's about keeping the call alive while also opening it up to new listeners. "We don't own a lot of vineyards anymore," she says. "We pull on growers and the relationships Larry has with them. Our responsibility is looking after those growers."

And in the end, that's what separates Whipbird and NOW. from the crowd. The whistle is the story, but the business is the structure: multi-region sourcing, long-term grower partnerships, a portfolio that balances commercial varietals with adventurous ones, and a top tier that holds its own on restaurant lists. Wine that tells its story from generation to generation, but also stands up to the ledger. Because in wine, as in business, the trick isn't just making a noise; it's making sure someone pays to hear it again and again. ■