

# Zema dreaming

WHEN AN ITALIAN FAMILY FOUND A HOME ON A LEGENDARY PATCH OF SOUTH AUSTRALIAN TERRA ROSSA SOIL, MAGIC WAS MADE. TO CELEBRATE A LONG AND HAPPY RELATIONSHIP WINE SELECTORS WAS INVITED TO COONAWARRA TO TASTE LA DOLCE VITA AT ZEMA ESTATE.

Words **Nick Ryan** Photography **James Knowler**



**N**ick Zema was in his last year of high school when one night, as he did his homework, his father came into his room and told him to pack his books away.

“We’ve just bought a vineyard,” said Demetrio Zema. “I’ve been to see your headmaster to say you’re not coming back. We start picking in the morning.”

And so the Zema Estate story began and a long-held dream finally took root in red-dirt reality.

The connection with wine stretched across generations and hemispheres. Demetrio’s great grandfather had opened the first wine bar in the ancestral village back in Calabria in 1835 and wine has flowed freely through Zema veins ever since. But it was love that transferred this vinous tale to Coonawarra.

Shortly after Demetrio and Francesca Zema were engaged, Francesca’s family emigrated to South Australia and her father began working in the vineyards at Wynns with the understanding Francesca would return to Italy for the wedding once they were settled.

Demetrio Zema may be many things but patient isn’t one of them, so, tired of waiting for Francesca’s return, he set out for the other side of the world to meet his bride. Fifty-two years, two sons and thirty vintages later, Demetrio and Francesca are still here and the Zema name has become synonymous with Coonawarra. In particular, it’s renowned for consistently excellent expressions of Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon that actually embody the often cited but rarely seen concept of ‘over-delivering.’

The recent chance to taste a bunch of these wines with Nick Zema, winemaker and local landmark Greg Clayfield and Wine Selectors’ Trent Mannell, then enjoy lunch with Demetrio and Francesca promised to be an experience that would live up to its Dream Vertical billing.



## SHIRAZ

It’s entirely appropriate that a tasting of this nature kicks off with the still-supple 1982 Shiraz, the foundation stone of Zema Estate. Picking started on the day after Nick left school, the wine was fermented in an old milk tanker and matured in some old oak picked up from Wynns.

The wine still looks a decade younger than it is, beautifully structured, still juicy and lightly grippy on the finish. It was an immediate and emphatic indicator that after years of trying, the Zemas had finally secured a special bit of terra rossa dirt.

When each of us nominated our top wines of the bracket, one wine that was unanimously ranked ‘top three’ was the stunning 99, a vintage Nick has always believed was hugely under-rated.

It’s a wine with a seductive aromatic lift, a vibrant core of sweet fruit – think cherry ripens and quince paste, a beautifully supple and mouth-filling palate and fine, powdery tannins.

### The Wines

#### Estate Shiraz

1982, 1991, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008

#### Family Selection Shiraz

2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006

#### Estate Cabernet Sauvignon

1991, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008

#### Family Selection Cabernet Sauvignon

1991, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006

“The fortunes of all good Coonawarra winemakers rise and fall on their Cabernet and this was a tasting that proved Zema sits comfortably in the region’s top tier”



“Coonawarra Shiraz at its best is always a middleweight,” explained Nick. “We get this lovely, long ripening period and we always pick on flavour. We can be picking Shiraz in mid April at just 12.5 degrees baumé.

Of the younger wines the troublesome 07 vintage took everyone by surprise.

“We lost about 75 per cent of the crop through a series of spring frosts but what survived was bloody good and we shouldn’t forget that,” said Nick.

A dark and spicy core of fruit, silky palate texture and fine, tightly knit tannins should ensure that while it may be hard to find, it won’t be forgotten.

The Family Selection wines represent a noticeable step up in style – bigger oak influence, bigger fruit impact and bigger ambition. Nick admits the 01 and 02 (featured in the tasting) copped a touch too much oak as they still searched for a suitable style, but all agreed by 2004 they’d hit on the right formula.

While the other three favoured the admittedly very good 2005, I was particularly taken with the 2006, a lithe and quite classically framed wine with bright, ripe cherry and raspberry fruit dusted with baking spices. I couldn’t help speculating that it was no coincidence this was the first vintage with the masterful Clayfield at the helm.

But there was one thing that came through clearest across the bracket: while Cabernet may be king in Coonawarra, the region is capable of some very fine Shiraz and Zema is its greatest exponent.

#### CABERNET SAUVIGNON

The fortunes of all good Coonawarra winemakers rise and fall on their Cabernet and this was a tasting that proved Zema sits comfortably in the region’s top tier.

Pleasingly the recent wines looked particularly impressive, with strong support for the primary and pretty 2008, a wine drenched in cassis and threaded with incredibly fine grained tannin.

The savoury and restrained 07 is a wine built for the long haul, but the small harvest may mean too few ever make it that far. We were especially taken with the elegant 06, redolent with dark berry fruits, pie crust and sage leaves. You rarely see this kind of structure at this price.

The older Estate Cabernets helped reinforce the notion that this property produces some of the most keenly priced reliable cellaring prospects anywhere. The 1991 is a lovely mature wine – dry leaf, cedar and sage – that retains a bright and fresh acidity with enough well-developed fruit character to match it.

Greg noted an appealing crushed autumn leaf character and added,

“Coming into the 90s people were chasing concentration as a reaction to the fashion for under-ripeness and greenness that was so big in the 80s. I think we’re coming back to a sensible middle ground between the two extremes, but this wine shows Zema was there all along.”

The 1998 was a wine easily living up to the reputation of the vintage. Bright, almost jube fruit of remarkable freshness and vitality, lavender, cassis and the classic Coonawarra mint.

“Pick a descriptor for Coonawarra Cabernet and you’ll find it here,” noted Trent, only half joking.

It is with Cabernet that the Family Selection approach really pays dividends. The extra oak sits nicely back in the fruit and emphasises those woodier aspects of Cabernet’s personality; think cedar and cigarbox, and that extra focus on structure, both in the fruit and the winemaking, suits these wines well.

The firm, forthright and fruit-rich 06 was widely supported and all agreed it was a wine with a long future in the cellar. Greg especially liked the aromatic allure and fine etching of the 05, and we couldn’t help but agree, and the 02 showed just how satisfying and beautifully integrated these wines can become with time.

We’ll happily be back in a decade just to make sure. ■



Clockwise from left: The crew sit down to enjoy one of Francesca Zema’s legendary lunches; The Zema Estate winery; Nick Zema; (l to r) Nick Zema, Trent Mannell, Nick Ryan and Greg Clayfield; tasting notes.

