

Inside TarraWarra's spectacular 2024 vintage release

By **Katrina Butler**
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New appointments to the team and access to a special site have resulted in wines of perfume

There's been a changing of the guard at [TarraWarra](#). With the appointment of industry veteran Samantha Isherwood as general manager in 2023 came a tidal wave of revered talent in both the winemaking and viticulture teams – ex-[De Bortoli](#) legend (and trade favourite) Sarah 'Fages' Fagan and viticulture gun Chris Beard (ex-[Yarra Yering](#), [Mount Mary](#), [Seville Estate](#)) joined the team shortly thereafter. Sam hit the ground running, with the objective to “improve the health of the vineyards, the quality of the fruit to provide a sense of place and for TarraWarra Estate to be seen as authentic and unique,” she says.

“To be able to recruit a winemaker and viticulturist that have the same vision and dedication to quality, sustainability, and change has been a gift,” Sam adds. “The understanding and passion for the [Yarra Valley](#) that Sarah and Chris both have is extensive, and benefited TarraWarra immediately.”

It's this trajectory of impeccable decision-making and Sam's ability to recalibrate the team and discern how far to push boundaries that have resulted in a string of improvements.



TarraWarra Estate, Yarra Valley.

The first was to lease a special site with untapped potential in Gembrook, in the Upper Yarra Valley – a site that Fages speaks of in high regard. “To have Swallowfield come into the fold was very exciting,” she says. “I was familiar with lots of wines that had been made from fruit from that vineyard, and I was quite excited to have access to that vineyard resource.” The wines she references are not dust collectors either, with the likes of [Mac Forbes](#), Seville Estate, [Timo Mayer](#), [Giant Steps](#) and [Dappled](#) having sourced from the property in years gone by.

I took a trip out to Swallowfield with Halliday taster [Philip Rich](#). After an hour-long rattle up the winding hills in the back of Chris Beard’s ute, we arrived at Scouts 1st Gembrook. As we passed through the property, we were greeted by a steep and eerily beautiful tree-lined vineyard, surrounded by bush. Planted to chardonnay and pinot noir in the mid-90s by owner Phillip Abela, high density wasn’t a priority at Swallowfield, nor much of the Yarra Valley at the time. This has led Chris and his viticulture team (which includes the remarkable talent of Natillie Johnson, of [Tillie J Wines](#), and vineyard manager Stuart Sissins) to work tirelessly to improve concentration and intensity of the fruit by reducing yields from eight tonnes per hectare to 2.4 tonnes. “This will come up over time but right now that’s what the vineyard is capable of from a vine health and wine quality perspective,” Chris says.

There’s work happening underground, too. The extremely fertile feeder roots had grown in shallow soil across the face of the vineyard. Chris uncovered one with his boot – it was as hairy as a woolly mammoth. Yet the transformation from beast to beauty is exactly why this is a rejuvenation project of sincere anticipation and excitement for the team. Swallowfield is a much-loved winemaking playground, and TarraWarra is a fresh coat of paint.



Sarah 'Fages' Fagan and Chris Beard.

It would be remiss to make these investments at a leased site without extending them to estate-grown fruit, and the 2024 vintage doesn’t just mark the inaugural releases of TarraWarra Swallowfield Vineyard Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but also the first bottling of their Southern Slopes Chardonnay as a single-block wine. As Chris explains: “We have reset expectations of all blocks. We no longer pre-determine where things will end up (estate vs. reserve). We simply throw everything at each block in the hope that they all make a single-

vineyard grade.” This includes a focus on optimal cover crops, an increase in organic fertiliser, and a planned compost program.

As for Fages, she is anything but hands-off. Aside from regularly ruminating in the vineyards for fear of missing the window to pick the fruit when it’s “bang on ready,” she is creating wines that frame their perfume and purity. This involves minimising the time spent in oak and embracing large-format oak as a key to retaining freshness. And she’s nailing it. All three wines from this release have struck gold, and it’s not just the chardonnays and pinots that drive her to excel. “Varieties like [syrah](#) and [barbera](#) are quite exciting also. Syrah seems to thrive on the hill, producing perfumed, spicy wines with a nice gravel tannin flow. The barbera is super fun, with all its violets, blue fruits and purple hue. Gentle and silky on the palate too. And who wouldn’t be excited about nebbiolo?” Nobody has the right not to be excited by nebbiolo.

For now, this release possesses newly minted jewels for the re-polished TarraWarra crown – yet without doubt, there’s more gold to unearth.