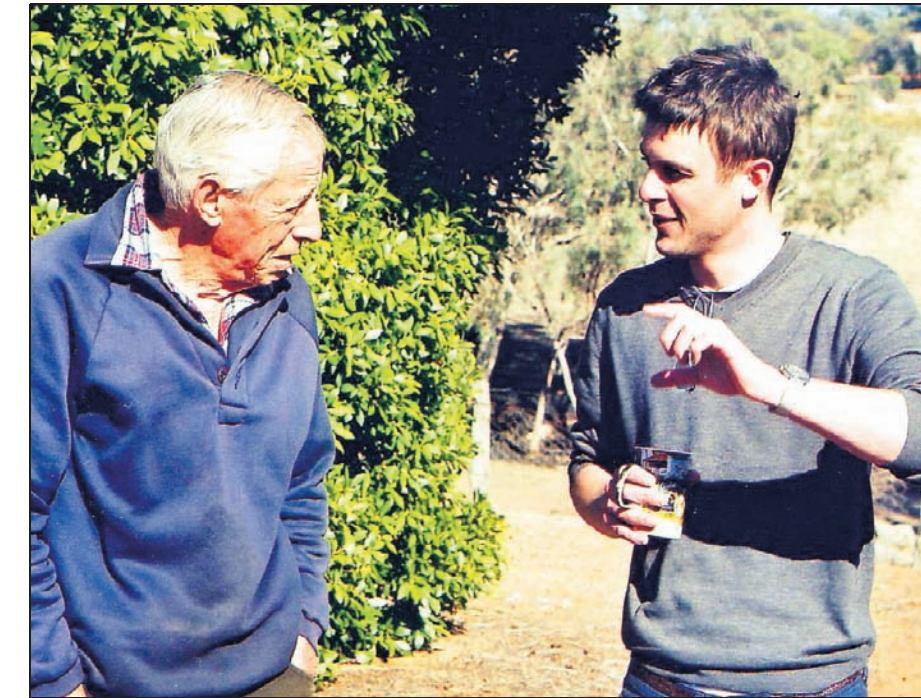
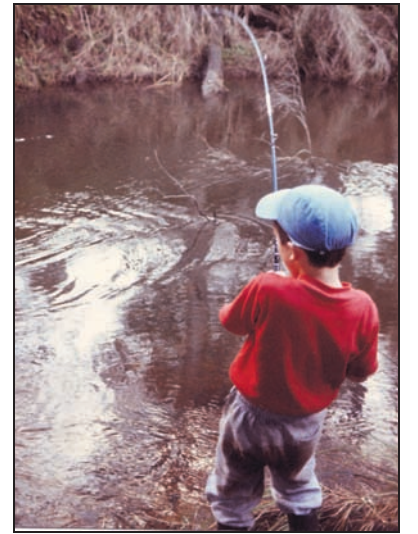




Photo: Ben Searcy



One of the new wave ... Tom Riley, red winemaker for the Koonunga Hill and Thomas Hyland ranges, with his grandfather Hector Wood, above, and (right) Tom during his early boyhood.



## Young vintage

TOM RILEY is one of a new wave of winemakers aged under 35 making a major impact in Australia.

Like Riley, many of them come from winemaking families. Among the rising stars working with their parents are Nick Farr (son of Gary) at By Farr and Farr Rising in Geelong; Emma Bowen, daughter of Doug Bowen, at Bowen Estate in Coonawarra; and Rollo Crittenden, son of Garry, at Crittenden Estate on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria.

At Peter Lehmann in the Barossa, son Phil Lehmann recently returned from Yalumba to take a winemaking role with his father, who is known as "the Baron of the Barossa".

Other young guns include William Downie, now on his own after working under winemaker of the year Steve Webber at De Bortoli Yarra Valley;

Usher Tinkler, who works with veteran Patrick Auld at Poole's Rock in the Hunter Valley; and Ben Haines at Mitchelton in Victoria.

More outstanding young talents include Fran Austin at Bay Of Fires in Tasmania; Jim Chatto at Pepper Tree in the Hunter; and Kym Teusner from the Barossa Valley.

Tinkler, 29, believes the new generation brings "optimism, creativity, new techniques and a more global approach" to the industry.

Talented young women to watch include Anna Pooley, from a Tasmanian winemaking family, who makes the Heemskerck range for Foster's, and Helen McCarthy, blossoming under the tutelage of chief winemaker Adam Eggins at Taylors Wines in the Clare Valley.

# Home on the Grange

ONLY four men have ever made Penfolds Grange, Australia's iconic red wine - its creator Max Schubert; Don Ditter, John Duval and Peter Gago. All are legendary figures in the industry. Given that the current release of Grange retails for more than \$500 and a single bottle of the initial 1951 release once fetched \$54,000 at auction, it is a role that carries significant pressure.

Tom Riley, one of the rising stars of Australian winemaking, may one day learn about that pressure. At 28 Riley is regarded as one of the potential heirs to Gago, the keeper of the flame. He has been a member of the Penfolds red winemaking team, headed by Gago, Steve Lienert and Alan Baldwin, since 2006. Fellow winemakers talk of his infectious enthusiasm, passion and natural ability. For now he oversees the red wines in the Koonunga Hill and Thomas Hyland

**A talented artist and surfer, as well as winemaker, Tom Riley is set to cultivate a national icon, writes WINSOR DOBBIN.**

ranges but, given the rapid trajectory his career has followed, the sky is the limit. Riley loves wine but he is far from obsessive. A talented surfer who tries to catch a wave every weekend, he is also an artist of note, was a finalist in this year's *Cleo* Bachelor of the Year competition and is an avid fisherman. Inspired by his artist mother, Riley began painting at the age of 14. His natural talent quickly shone through as he won competitions, earned commissions and exhibited his work. Today his art takes a back seat to winemaking but it remains one of his major passions.

"To do a painting you need at least two weeks of doing painterly stuff," he says. "A painting comes out of a long creative process - you can't just say 'I've got an idea, I'll paint something.'" Riley amuses himself with photography, working with materials such as oils, acrylics and house paints, as well as creating multi-media works. "Creating art can be exhausting because you become so focused on what you are doing," he says. "It's real mental exertion and it's hard to find the time that serious art demands, although I can still appreciate it and have an aesthetic understanding of it."

Wine, however, is in his blood - almost literally. At age four he fell into an open red wine fermenting vat at Coorinja Winery in the Perth Hills that has been in his mother's family since the 1880s.

"That probably explains a lot of things about me," he laughs. He was quickly fished out by his father Geoff.

His father, now a professor of psychiatry at the University of Western Australia, planted vines when he worked as a GP at Pemberton and was later the founding president of the Pemberton Vignerons' Association and a TAFE lecturer in wine.

"I remember hanging around my mother's family's winery when I was a very young boy - and I've never forgotten any of those harvest-time activities or the evocative smells of ports and sherries from the winery," Riley says. "They were etched into my memory. I remember getting really excited about the aromas. My father has collected very good Bordeaux since the early '70s and so I was exposed to good wine when I

was very young." Riley was soon able to identify grape varieties and the regions they were from without looking at the labels.

"By age 18 or 19 I was thinking, 'Wow, this is it,'" he says. "It was thrilling, understanding different places and varieties and being able to identify them. I thought, 'I can do this!' That was a nice surprise and so I got a job at a local wine merchant in Cottlesloe and was able to expand my tasting a lot more.

"At no point did I know that I wanted to be a winemaker but I was excited and intrigued at finding something I could be passionate about."

Riley was not initially keen on entering the *Cleo* Bachelor of the Year awards after being nominated by the Penfolds marketing department. "It's really not my sort of thing and I was a little prejudiced about it," he says, but in the end he enjoyed it.

"It's hard not to have a good time at a party when there are 50 guys and something like 350 attractive girls." He's a sensitive new age guy, so when

*Cleo* asked him whether he preferred "boobs or butt", he declined to answer. But Riley is newly single, his Swedish girlfriend having recently returned home after her visa expired.

He keeps himself busy in his art studio at home in Port Adelaide, at the Penfolds Winery in the Barossa Valley, or catching waves off Port Willunga, as well as jogging regularly.

Riley enjoys the educational role that comes with being a winemaker and loves encouraging young people to sample and understand wine.

"I find it most important that you can take what you understand and taste and put that into someone else's head efficiently.

"You don't need a lot of jargon and meaningless winespeak. You just take people through what they taste in a wine, mainly through comparisons between different styles.

"Wine is not just a drink for older people - it needs to be made accessible because there is a wine for everyone.

When it comes down to it it's just a bloody drink that's great with food. It's important people don't get too wound up about it."

Riley's career began when he studied for a bachelor of science in horticulture and viticulture in Western Australia.

He was then selected to study

**'It's hard not to have a good time at a party when there are 50 guys and something like 350 attractive girls.'**

winemaking at the Waite campus in South Australia. During his last year at Waite, in 2002, he worked at the Nobilo Winery in New Zealand and won the inaugural Beringer Blass Wine Estates prize, which earned him a job at the Wolf Blass Winery.

Since then he has worked vintages in Coonawarra and at Chassagne-Montrachet in Burgundy. Chardonnay, the great white wine of Burgundy, remains his true love, even though he spends his working life with red wines.

Riley joined the Penfolds red winemaking team in 2006 and is awed to find himself tasting and blending wines such as Grange, RWT and Bin 407 cabernet sauvignon.

He says he never thinks about the possibility of eventually becoming the man behind Grange.

"There's a terrifying sense of responsibility being involved in creating something like Grange and at no stage do you ever feel worthy," he says.

"It's scary, and you don't expect to completely understand it, but I'm learning from excellent people."

At home Riley drinks a lot of chablis and other white burgundies, while his favourite red is the Penfolds classic Bin 407 cabernet sauvignon, about which he waxes lyrical, leaving no doubt about his love for wine.

He also agrees with the recent criticism Australian wines have suffered from overseas critics for being too big and alcoholic.

"Many Australian wines are far too high in alcohol," he says.

"You have to focus on what you can do best - and we do produce full flavoured and generous wine - but we also have to adapt and change.

"At Penfolds our alcohol levels have never been that high but it is a problem for the industry as a whole.

"Balance and freshness are the keys. You have to make what people want but maintain integrity at the same time."

Even given his rapid career trajectory,

Riley admits to sometimes suffering self-doubt. "Because I have so many other things in my life I sometimes question my passion for wine but I know my stuff and I think I've managed to create a life with real balance," he says.

"It's hard to find time to run but staying fit is really important, both for the olfactory benefits and making sure your palate is working.

"If I get unfit I'm less receptive to wine. If you do something else, like painting, you have an outside perspective."

As the son of a psychiatrist and an artist, Riley has creativity - he is working on trials with some completely unopened red wines - and a keen, inquiring mind.

He credits his parents for the rapid success he has enjoyed.

"I truly feel blessed," he says. "I've been brought up with a lot of love, care and affection and I owe an immense amount to Mum and Dad.

"Sometimes I have to pinch myself to convince me that my life is real."