

Bottled redemption

David Franz Lehmann's one-man show includes a measure of honest, hard work – which has its own rewards.

PETER Lehmann's trees had grown so much they blocked the view. That's how long it had been since I'd sat at the big wooden table in his and Margaret's kitchen, drawn up a pew, addressed the glasses and plunged into the fiery discussion which has raged there, non-stop, since that rather grand joint was built in the '80s. Whoever's there, they'll be ploughing through the problems of the world. This is where one finds stuff out. While one drinks.

Compared with some of the Valley's more baroque tangles of society and business, P.L.'s is pretty well nailed down now. The biggest change is generational. I was there to taste the new wines of David Franz Lehmann, the first of two sons born to Peter and his second wife, Margaret.

Philip, the second son, is earning admiration for his winemaking at Valumba, where Peter first worked as a winemaker in the '50s. Doug, from the first marriage, is still MD of the burgeoning Peter Lehmann wines, now in benevolent Swiss hands, but towering, nevertheless, over Peter's screening hedge of native veg.

And David, who manages the family's privately owned vineyards, is building his own winery on the site of Peter's old tractor shed, up the hill a bit in the sand and ironstone. There's a reef of the stuff running through from the Greenock Hills to the old German settlement at Langmeil. It was used in the original wineries and cottages there on Langmeil Rd. Peter's tractor shed and previous dwelling were built from it; David's new winery is a clever mixture of ironstone and stainless steel, and the surrounding vineyards make extra special wine because of its irascence. Think Stonewell.

Funny thing about that tractor shed. In 1986, when P.L. was being buffed and bounced in a string of scary financial hicups, his tractor seemed to grow an extra skin of rust. Lack of love more than your actual abuse; the shed was so packed with barrels of old tawny port that the tractor lived out in the rain. More for bank-type reasons than tractor cosmetics. Peter got his bleaching hat on, and produced an amazing port that was soon quite famous, especially in Britain, where most of it was sold. Out of respect for a hymn book from my youth, I suggested he call it Old Redemption, and composed a bark label lauding the Barossa's tendency to stack port away for rainy days and sudden bursts of thirst, and suggesting that there was still serious redemption available in the best Barossa tractor sheds. When Old Redemption was first assembled, its average age was over 50 years. (Some of the port was already old when Peter first



stashed it 50 years before.) Now, Peter and David have given the same barrels a second nudge, and blended another Old Redemption. It is, quite simply, a ravishing drink. Very, very, old, now of course, with a splash of fresh young stuff to put a star in its halo. History.

The new David Franz label also graces three very fine reds – a shiraz, a cabernet and a blend – and one of the world's more eccentric and flavoursome roses. There's a source block in the corner of one of the vineyards, from which cuttings were taken to establish the bigger plantings in the old days. There are many varieties there: shiraz, cabernet, mataro, grenache, frontignan, pedro ximenes, and only Bacchus knows what not. Eighty years old, David picks them all together, leaves the must on skins for five days, basket-presses it, leaves it on its yeast lees for three months, and bingo. Guess why this wine is more complex, interesting, rewarding and desirable than the

bleached overcropped sugary cabernet rose that's packing the shelves. David has two delightful whites – a riesling and a semillon – due for early spring release. Both are distinguished by their intensity and freshness, despite getting the old basket-press treatment usually reserved for reds.

"I wrap the basket press up in shrinkwrap and fill it with dry ice before I stack the fruit in," he explains. "Avoiding oxidation, I want the whites to be zippy, fresh and clean." And, er, the matter of expansion? Another huge Lehmann tank farm? "My true aspiration is to keep it a one-man show," he says. "I'm a bit of a tight-arse and I don't really want to employ anyone else."

"It really changes the style of the business, and it wouldn't be truly hands-on. I've touched every single bottle of David Franz."

That includes making the silk screens and baking the text on to each bottle. There's redemption in honest, hard work, too, see.

David Lehmann at Tarunda Winery with his dog Mio.

Pictures: Grant Nowell

