



"Fire authorities sift through Victory Hotel ruins" blared my browser. Not The Vic! Had Bacchus torched one of our best pubs in exchange for my glee over the demise of Starbucks?

No, it wasn't Douglas Govan's Victory, that hallowed thirst emporium on Sellick's Hill. It was the Vic in Brisbane that Bacchus blitzed. Along with all those Starbucks. I mean, bad luck, Brisbane, but ... Whew.

There was an essay competition. "I won it with an entry under my own name," says Douglas. "And I also came third with another entry under another name. With the winnings I bought a Sony amplifier. I had no speakers or anything. Just the amp. I'd turn it on and marvel at the little green light. There was a Japanese kid at school with big stereo headphones. He let me try them on and once I was in there – like wow! Stereo! Suddenly I understood. I got right into music. I got into some serious platter-spinning. The wheels of steel. Within a few years I was running nightclubs, and eventually made enough money to buy a pub."

...just in case you were wondering where great publicans come from ...

And Douglas is a great publican. The Vic, which he's owned since 1989, is the most successful and respected public house and victualler in the McLaren Vale region, if not the whole of the Fleurieu. Now it also has three wicked little B&Bs, which together add up to something along the lines of the Great Bed Of Ware, which held around 20 passengers at a time in the White Hart Inn in Hertfordshire, as reported in Billy Shakespaw's *Twelfth Night*. Another great pub.

All of which says something. The Vale's generally had good pubs. In 1845 *The South Australian* praised "the extensive and rich valley of McLaren ... almost the whole of the country inns visited on this trip are neatly and cleanly kept ... everywhere the traveller meets with civility and attention ... and there was no lack of good viands".

The Vic did disappoint me, once. A decade back, I stupidly went down there for a restorative steak on New Year's Day. Came in a bit late and shaky, but there stood Douglas on the lawn, up to



Escape to Victory

his ankles in beer cans and butts. Incredulous. It had been a large night. "You gotta be joking!" he said when I asked to be fed. "Take a look around. If you'd eat anything I cooked today you'd be mad. Look at me! Go back to The Barn Whitey." Even Lord Nelson had his bad day on the mighty vessel which gave this inn its name.

Since then, The Vic has well and truly made up for that brief, forgiveable lapse. Nowhere will you buy better, fresher, simple seafood, or more succulent steaks. Try that eye fillet. (No pun intended, m'Lud). And then there's the cellar. Oh my.

Pubs with great wine lists? The Exeter. The Wheatsheaf in Thebarton. But the Victory's is the best. You may know another; it's not jumping to my mind. Take a tumble down into The Vic's cellar, and you're suddenly far too deep behind the lines: out in the nether

regions beyond thirst being your major excuse: greed takes over. Eat your plastic. Retreat.

See. You can't. You look about: Castagna. Cascabel. Chablis. Chevalier. Cullen. Greenock Creek. All the best, impossible to procure pinots. Wines from temples so great and rare and secret that I never mention them.

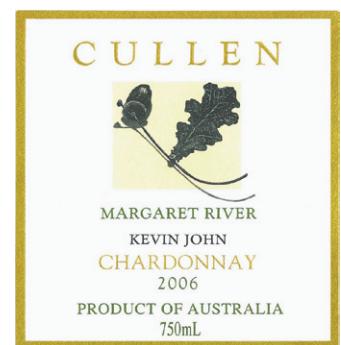
And now The Vic's getting bigger. Douglas has built a huge new cellar, which will permit him to display for sale some of the various thousands of premium rarities he's been collecting and maturing. There'll be a new verandah for smokers, with a view clear down to somewhere near Antarctica. So what's the catch? Well, the front bar's about to get a lot bigger, too. That's the price you pay.

Then there's the little matter of the vineyards, one either side of the pub – one in McLaren Vale; one in Southern Fleurieu – planted from

cuttings from Douglas's favourite vineyards. Follow the track between them for five minutes and you're in the ABC Range in the Northern Flinders. Literally. Same geological group: the fossils, and the vegetation. Come back down the gorge, and again you've got that view over the Gulf St Vincent, patron of viticulturers, vinegar makers, lost stuff, and schoolgirls.

Given the nature of The Victory, these wines are sold under the Rudderless brand, which has nothing to do with Kevin. Made by Justin McNamee at Samuel's Gorge, they're something else, too. Shiraz, grenache, graciano, malbec, mataro and viognier, growing in sparse dirt that tastes nearly as good as the pub food. Seriously. I've tasted it all. A smorgasbord.

And since I've been snide about Starbucks, try The Victory's coffee. They'll even make a castrato. All you get is the squeak.



Cullen	\$70
Kevin John	13.5% alcohol
Margaret River	Screw cap
Chardonnay 2006	95+ points

Kevin John Cullen was the Dad of Vanya, the winemaker. Margaret is the name of the River. I always do maker, brand name, district, variety, vintage, see. Which has taken up space I should have devoted to this friggin' stunning chardonnay. I've seen stuff like this at assemblage at Krug. The label's wrong: the alcohol is actually 13%. Biodynamic 20 and 30-year-old vines erect this magnificent, dense, towering menhir. A syrup of whip-smooth natural acidity with just enough snazzy oak to remind me of the rabbit I just smoked – I'll smoke anything – it's the best chardonnay of the year. Cellar. Smoke rabbits. www.cullenwines.com.au

Tim Smith Wines	\$27
Barossa	14.5% alcohol
Mataro Grenache	Screw cap
Shiraz 2006	94 points

Placing him heavens above the Audi/Beemer/Benz blitz of oberweinlieutnants, Smiffy rides a Trumphy. (We won.) And he calls monastrell matoro, which is what Australians called it before we got all poofy. He loves, and understands, the wines of Bandol, on the French Mediterranean. Where it's mourvedre. This svelte Barossa luxury smokes. Tight, slick, pin-striped to bloody near perfection, she lit up a Lucky and blew the smoke off her .38. She's in this glass. Slightly slurry, like Breathless Mahoney slurs, but acid-cut crystal smudged with lipstick perfection, basically. Marella. Kalamata. Walnuts. Purr. www.timsmithwines.com.au

