

PREMIER CREW

Australians with large and prestigious private wine cellars are not in it for the money. The thrill of the chase and the anticipation of the taste are what gives this 'hobby' its special frisson

WHILE THERE ARE endless column inches written about billionaires and hip-hop stars buying up the world's most expensive wines, there is another, more discreet side to this exclusive market. It consists of networks of aficionados who are characterised by understatement. In this world, relationships, passion and understanding open doors, rather than money – although that can help. Within the wider industry, Australia's wine collectors have serious clout. They belong to exclusive clubs, with evocative names such as the Single Bottle Club, where members gather from time to time to share exceptional bottles of wine; Sydney's Monday Table; Melbourne's Monday Table.

Apart from prominent businessmen and members of the professions, collectors are often in the wine business, as wine judges, winemakers or wine merchants. Ultimately, they are passionate about the industry, wine and collecting. And they know a great bottle of wine isn't about the price tag, or a collection about what it's worth.

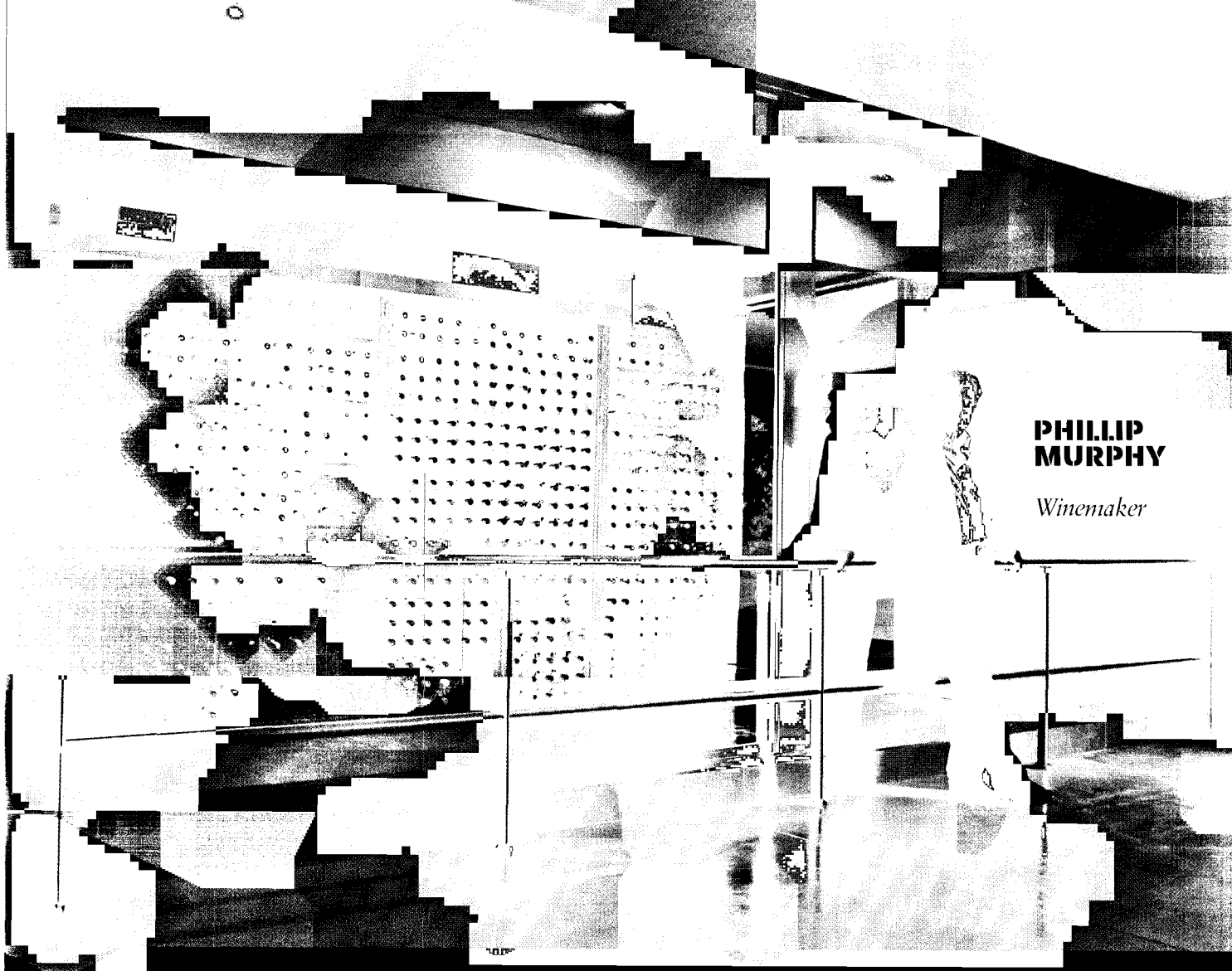
"Having a wine cellar is like having an art collection," says Andrew Caillard, director of Langton's wine auctioneers. "The main difference is that bottles are meant to be shared and enjoyed. Hence most people who have serious wine cellars have a tremendous generosity of spirit and love of life and people. Rarely are such collections put together for investment purposes."

In Australia, this tight-knit group of collectors tends to be linked at some point with Len Evans, the Hunter Valley-based wine critic, winemaker and collector who died last year. They would also have run into the late wine trader Anders Josephson, the Swede who migrated to Australia in 1984 and set up a business buying and cellaring young Australian wines with a view to selling them as mature wines.

It includes people such as wine critic James Halliday, Dr Klaas Akkerman, barristers Greg Melick and Francis Douglas, investment banker Ross Grant, wine scion Phillip Murphy and Yalumba owner Robert Hill Smith. Television personality Daryl Somers is a passionate collector, as is Aussie Home Loans' John Symond and Pacific Equity Partners' Simon Pillar. Many of these collectors have more than 5,000 bottles cellared, and are unlikely to drink them all in one lifetime. One of the country's largest collections is that of Canberra-based Amalgamated Property Group's Graham Potts, who has a 12,000-bottle cellar. Other notable collectors include US-based millionaire David Doyle, who has a home in Sydney, and Macquarie Bank non-executive chairman David Clarke.

A collection isn't only about size. "A great cellar is a balanced collection that reflects eclecticism rather than obsession," Caillard says. "The best cellars always have wine from off the beaten track; personal favourites or [wine] from places that bring some form of resonance." Collectors say it's being able to 'nose out' and discover the unexpected and the rare: whether it's a bottle of wine that was discovered in a shipwreck or a case of burgundy that was bought and cellared years ago, waiting for just the right moment to be uncorked. Or it may be as simple as stumbling upon a new winery and enjoying a bottle you have never heard of before.

Insiders say the key is to follow your interests and passion – be it Bordeaux, Burgundy, Italian or Spanish wines, Australian reds, or fortifieds. Old-world wines tend to offer collectors the opportunity for the best fossicking, due to the variability of vintages because of different harvest conditions and the way the winemaker adjusts his or her technique to reflect that. Eventually, most collectors seem to gravitate towards Burgundy, which produces pinots and chardonnays, and is fashionable now in the same way Bordeaux once was.



PHILLIP MURPHY

Winemaker

A passionate pinot drinker, Phillip Murphy has gone right back to basics: he's studying winemaking. Murphy – who founded and then sold his chain of Melbourne-based bottle shops, which he set up following a split with his father Dan – moved to the Mornington Peninsula in 2002 to set up his own winery.

Now gearing up for a second vintage, Murphy says it's not a role he would ever have imagined for himself. "I never thought I'd be on the making side; you can't do that until you have a fair bit of time," he says. As for

his cellar, he says having his own production facilities has significantly beefed up his collection of 2,000 or so bottles – his pinot and chardonnay production is still too small to sell.

Murphy began collecting when he was in the trade, and says the collection simply evolved over time. "When you're working in a retail environment and selling wine all the time, you're obviously tasting a heck of a lot of it," he says. "In my early days, I really loved Penfolds reds, not so much Grange – that was still expensive – but [Bin] 389

[cabernet] and [Bin] 128 shiraz, and it was just building on that. Every time I saw a wine [I liked], I put aside three to six bottles, and it doesn't take long before you've got quite a variety."

Murphy now describes himself as "a bit of a traditionalist" and says he tends to decide on a yearly basis whether he will buy or not, rather than chasing a vertical collection. "In Europe, vintages vary considerably; you do tend to pick and choose," he says, noting he has a bias towards about six Burgundy domaines.

"When I first started collecting, I was interested in bordeaux. I didn't develop a taste for burgundy until my thirties and forties. As you grow older, you are not looking for the huge impact of cabernet and shiraz."

His cellar now holds about two-thirds burgundy, with some bordeaux, Australian and Italian wines, as well as a few from the Rhône Valley. Murphy insists on drinking his better wines with people who appreciate them. "It's very different to open a bottle with people who aren't interested ... I just don't do it," he says.

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Starting a c

Buy what you like t
Start with what you like; you
Not many people make mc
themselves lucky to cover t

Buy a few bottles &
Buy a few bottles and drink
how they mature.

Buy early
Wine is much cheaper befo
expensive to buy aged win

Storage conditions
Try to keep wine away from
a controlled temperature o
humidity also helps.

Buy from a wine m
Find someone you like and
merchant or importer.

Security
Wine is one of the easiest t
numbers or tracking device
often paid to steal a few kn

In the Dutch-born medico's 6,000-bottle cellar, there are two bottles of which he is particularly proud. Both are 1959 vintages – the year Klaas Akkerman was born – and special wine show releases

from the cellar of the late Max Schubert, the first Grange winemaker. Alongside his wine collection, Akkerman is a collector of many things: records, books and art. He says it's a backlash against a dour, Calvinist Dutch upbringing. "We lived quite a Dutch lifestyle ... my parents drank Dutch gin and sweet sherry," he says.

When he was in his late teens, Akkerman visited France and was knocked out by the *joie de vivre* that was part of the eating and drinking experience. "Part of the passion is collecting and drinking and the experience of it. What I [pursue] now is a combination of the quality of the drink and the rarity. It's also the pleasure of the hunt."

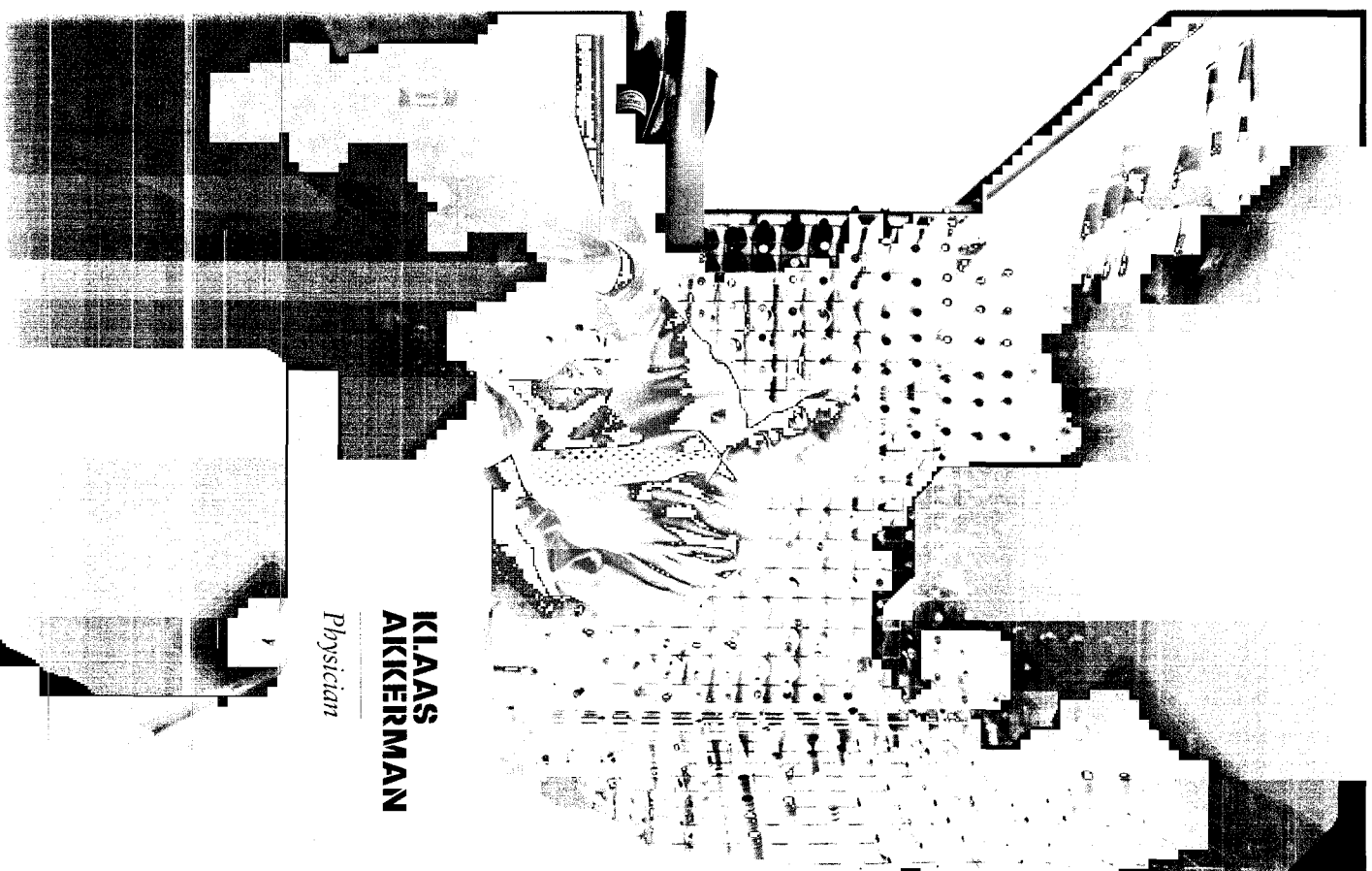
As there's only a slim chance Akkerman will drink all the wine he's collected, he's got a sideline selling wine to restaurants, which he says enables him to indulge even further in the thrill of the chase. For Akkerman, the limited production of Burgundy domaines makes the region particularly interesting, but his cellar is also crammed with Bordeaux and Australian wines. He came to Australia

when he was 26, and lived in Newcastle, which piqued his interest in Hunter Valley wines. "Basically, my cellar has changed over the years, based on two things: one is my wallet and what I can afford ... and the other one is ... your taste changes. It takes a long time to develop a good palate.

"How much money can you justify to spend on one bottle? Because we live in Australia, a lot of what I buy is coincidence driven; whatever is on the market, you get interested in. You get sucked in and pay an extra 10 per cent or so; you have to be disciplined."

Akkerman's passion was developed in a methodical and fairly clinical way. "When I was in my thirties I studied one region every year. Every night I'd sit at home and make an effort to buy a lot of wine from the region." As for drinking it, he says, "It's very much a social thing, to drink with people with similar understanding, the people who get it, and also people who are willing to put their hand in their pocket. It's not a cheap hobby."

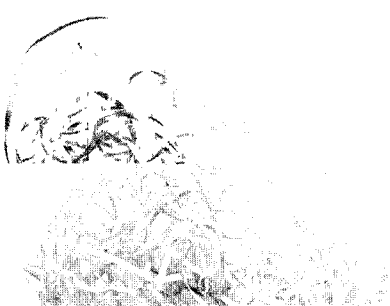
Finding people who appreciate wine as much as he does is not easy, Akkerman says there are probably only about 30 people in Australia who are "serious about wine". Earlier this year, he hosted a dinner for 14 friends for his 48th birthday, where the vintages served covered a span of 136 years.

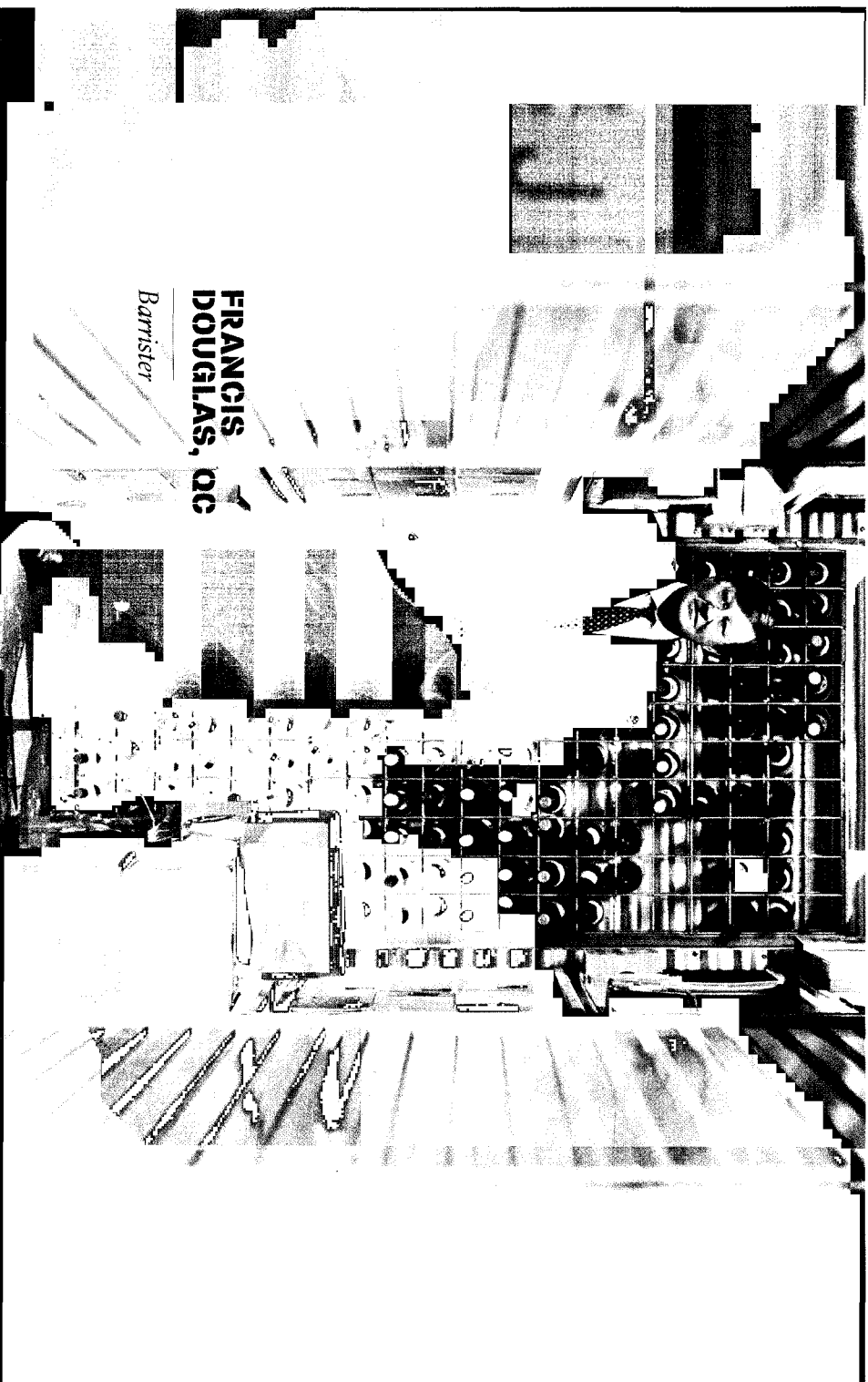


**KLAAS
AKKERMAN**

Physician

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FRANCIS DOUGLAS, QC

Barrister

Unlike other wine lovers, Francis Douglas considers the 1971 French vintage exceptional. The harvest's characteristics don't make it special, rather the fact that Douglas spent the summer months picking grapes in Bordeaux and Burgundy. "It's hard work; it was good for a rugby season and got me fit," says Douglas, who now owns a winery with Greg Melick.

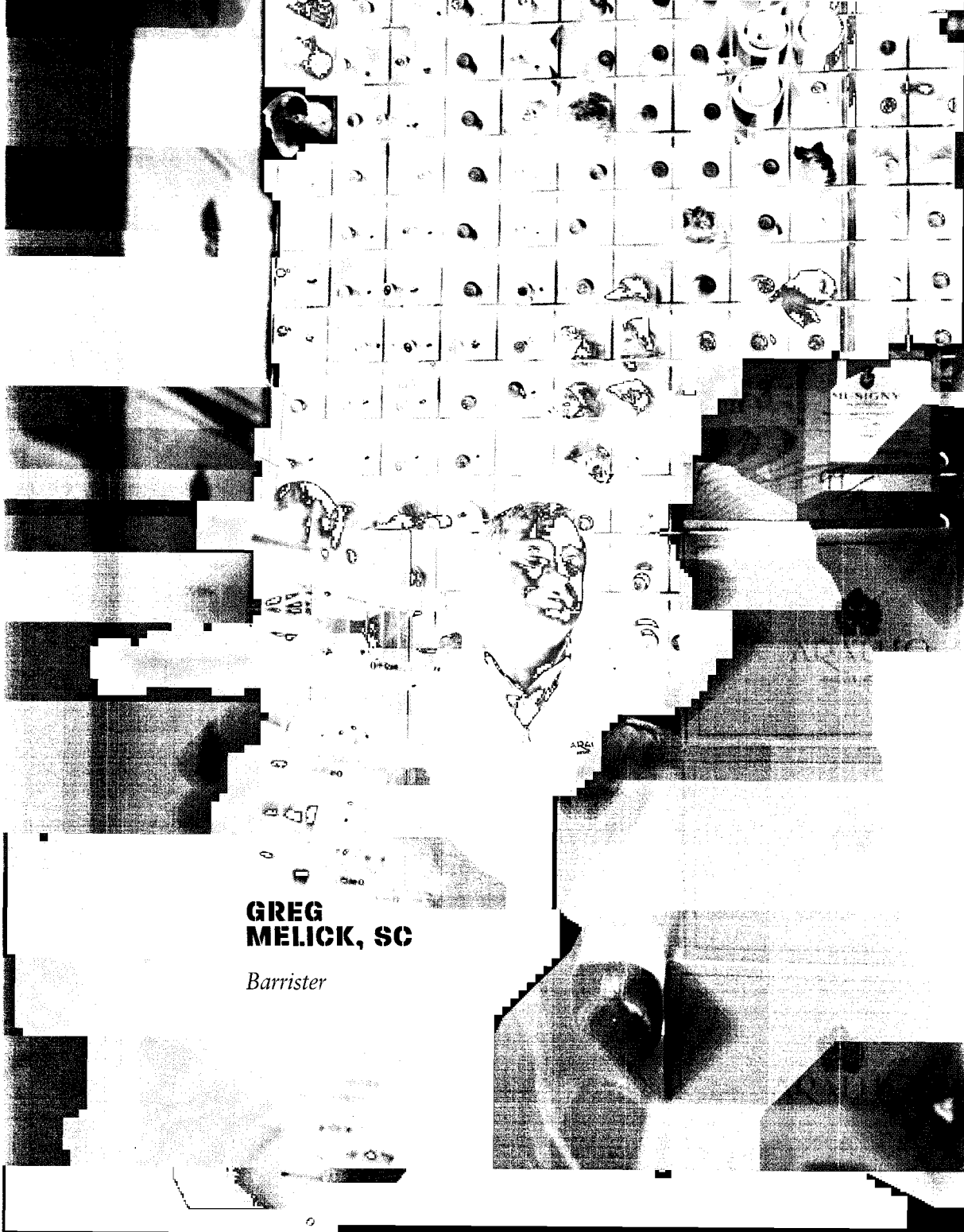
The 1971 harvest wasn't the first introduction to wine for Douglas, whose interest was first sparked by his father and the Brisbane Wine Society. From there, Douglas says, wine has introduced him to some fascinating people and places. Another part of the fun in collecting is the pleasure of association it brings. "You can sometimes pick out an old bottle and

remind yourself of what you were doing that year. Perhaps it was when your children were born, and it's a reminder of it." At university in Cambridge, Douglas would duck down to London for the Christie's wine auctions and, a few years later in Canberra, his interest deepened further. He says Gervase Coles, who had been a diplomat in Ireland,

shared his cellar of bordeaux and burgundy, which he built up on the back of the 1970s bust in wine prices. "Once you develop a taste for them [French wines], it is hard to get rid of it," Douglas says. "I think it's a disease really." More recently, Douglas has been part of the Sydney Monday Table, which has had many interesting members and meets monthly, with

different hosts for each gathering. As for his cellar – now in storage – Douglas says it has simply grown by acquisition, and that it's hard to pick favourites. He singles out Bordeaux, Burgundy and Rhône wines as those he particularly enjoys, but likes Italian varieties and champagne. "I love to drink wine with a little bit of bottle age," he says.

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GREG MELICK, SC

Barrister

Hobart-based barrister Greg Melick grew up with good wine. His grandmother and great-aunt were among the early Australian wine lovers who supported the fledgling industry in the 1950s. So much so, staff of a Hunter Valley winery they patronised used to applaud as they left the cellar after buying a case of wine, rather than the more fashionable fortified.

Melick's first serious wine investment was after he laid a \$1 bet on the Werribee races, won \$100 and bought two cases of 1964 Tyrrell's Dry

Red – he still has one bottle. From there, his interest and involvement in the world of wine grew. He is now chairman of The Wine Society and one of a few invited-only members of Primum Familiae Vini.

During his university days, Melick worked as a wine waiter at one of Sydney's top hotels, eventually finding his way to Len Evans's legendary Bulletin Place where he felt like "a kid in a candy store". He says he started his serious collection around 1984, by which stage he had amassed

a few thousand bottles of Australian wine. But then he dipped into French wine, buying 14 cases of 1982 bordeaux, at a price he says was amazingly cheap compared to current prices. Now burgundy is his real passion and his collection has more than 7,000 bottles. "I still like bordeaux, and I still like Australian wines. But Burgundy is really a minefield, the commune, the vineyards."

Melick began judging at wine shows in 1990, when he was distinguished by the

fact that he did work within the industry. "The worldwide wine community is a group that welcomes you with open arms, once they realise you're serious," he says.

"I judged with Len Evans, whose style of encouragement was to confront and cross-examine, whereas Max Lake was more embracing – both were incredibly generous with their time, knowledge and wine." Carpe Diem – the label of his Tasmanian winery with Francis Douglas – has just had its second harvest. ■

