



Clans push relative merits of Aussie wines

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 Wine writer

THE families are fighting back. Fed up with the bad press Australian wine has received internationally for the past few years — not to mention the constant reports of doom and gloom at home — a group of top winemaking families has formed an alliance to spread the message that this country doesn't only produce an ocean of cheap plonk with wallabies and koalas on the label.

The 12 members of the alliance, called Australia's First Families of Wine, are Brown Brothers, Campbells, Taylors, De Bortoli, Howard Park, McWilliam's, Tahbilk, Tyrrell's, Yalumba, D'Arenberg, Jim Barry and Henschke — all household

names (in wine-loving households, at least).

The alliance, to be launched later this month, plans to travel the world conducting tasting events.

First Families chairman and Tahbilk chief executive Alister Purbrick said: "We desperately need to change the global perception of Australian wine. We don't believe as individual companies we can stem the avalanche of news stories about Australia producing nothing but cheap industrial wines. But together we can present a powerful showcase of terrific regional wines of great diversity."

"And if we do a good job of that, it could have a fairy dust effect on the rest of the industry, and hopefully turn around the Queen Mary of

negative opinion."

Some industry commentators lay the blame for this negative opinion on the giant, publicly listed multinational corporations, such as Constellation Wines and Foster's, which have dominated the industry for years and concentrated on the cheap commodity end of the market rather than building the reputation of Australia's finer, regionally distinctive wines.

Critics point to the strife that Constellation and Foster's are going through — shedding staff; flogging off vineyards, wineries and brands; watching profits dwindle — as proof that the short-term, shareholder-driven strategy has spectacularly failed.

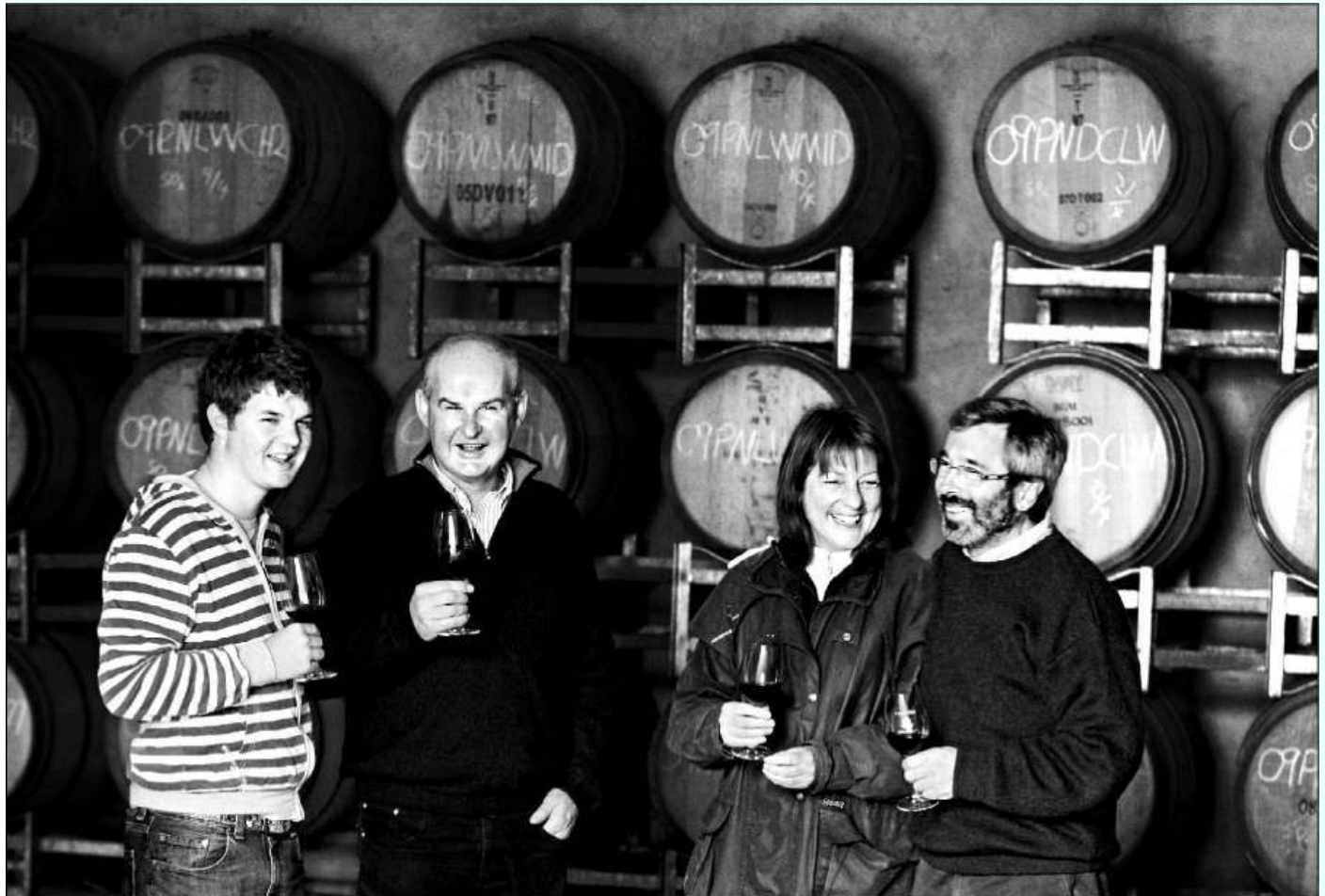
Members of the First Families alliance are careful not to link explicitly Australia's wine woes

with the publicly owned multinationals. But the implication is unavoidable.

"The wine industry requires long-term thinking," Mr Purbrick said. "And we believe that family wine companies are particularly well placed to weather the storm."

Stephen Henschke, whose family has been making wine in South Australia's Eden Valley since 1868, agreed.

"Everyone in the group shares the same philosophy," Mr Henschke said. "We're not about chasing the quick buck, we're not thinking about the bottom line. We are in this industry because we have a passion for what we're doing. We care about what we do. We're in it for the long term."



Taking up the fight: Peter and Sam Barry, of Jim Barry Wines, with Prue and Stephen Henschke of Henschke wines in Keyneton, South Australia, yesterday Picture: Kelly Barnes