

A Vintage Longboarder

# Jeff Burch

Jeff Burch's involvement with one of the Western Australian wine industry's great success stories came about through his love of surfing.

Jeff and his wife of 30 years, Amy, have owned Howard Park Wines for over a decade. They have vineyards and wineries in WA's Great Southern region and at Willyabrup in the heart of the State's most famous surf zone. Jeff is Managing Director and Amy is the Marketing Director of the growing wine group.

Under the Howard Park label, the Burchs produce acclaimed premium and super premium wines. In 2002, a barrel of Howard Park Cabernet Sauvignon sold for a record \$22,750 at auction. However, you can get their latest 'cab sav' vintage in liquor stores for about \$75 a bottle, plus the delightful and classy Howard Park Chardonnay and Howard Park Leston and Scotsdale Shiraz varieties for \$35 a bottle and Howard Park Riesling for \$25 a bottle.

Under the MadFish label they also produce soft, flavoursome and eminently drinkable wines which retail for under \$20. The brand has also been a big export success story in its own right.

The MadFish story began at Madfish Bay near the picturesque hamlet of Denmark on WA's Southern Ocean coast. According to the locals, when two tides meet in the bay, schools of small fish go mad and jump out of the water to avoid their larger marine predators.

In 1992, the MadFish Premium White was released, soon to be followed by MadFish Premium Red. And today the cool climate fruit produced at Denmark with its fresh, clean characteristics also include the much-lauded MadFish Chardonnay and Shiraz.

In 2000, the Burchs built their Howard Park winery at Willyabrup in the Margaret River region with its stunning architecturally-designed cellar door. It has become a 'must see' tourist attraction in its own right.

But the Howard Park/MadFish story really began some 18 years ago when the Burch family bought a beach shack at Yallingup so Jeff could indulge his passion for surfing. However, being at the gateway to the fast-developing Margaret River wine region, meant his growing personal interest as a wine collector and member of tasting groups would eventually evolve into a passion for quality wine making too.

Jeff grew up and learned to surf during the early 1960s on South Australia's mid coast near the Onkaparinga River at Seaford.



Turning 17 and getting a driver's licence saw him chasing waves with his mates at Victor Harbor and Middleton. During school holidays they ventured to the Yorke Peninsula in an old hearse and the surf at places like Pondolowie.

"One weekend, after much pleading and many assurances, Dad finally agreed to loan me his brand new X2 Holden. We were belting over a track on a sand dune when the roofrack collapsed and the weight of the boards crashing down caved in the roof of the car," Jeff said.

"But the waves were good so we went surfing. When we came in, we tied rope around the whole car to strap on the boards and climbed in through the windows. I had to be home for the Sunday night family roast dinner. I put the car in the garage and after dinner said I had to do homework but snuck outside, jumped over the back fence and went to a mate's place for the night. My brother said Dad went absolutely ballistic when he saw his car in the morning!

"Another time we took Mum's FJ Holden and left it parked on the beach while we

*Premium wine making and longboarding are two of a kind - both require time, finesse and skilled nose work.*



went for a surf. The tide came in and when we finished our session we paddled past the car, with water up to the doors and still rising, and back to the beach. I called Dad. He borrowed a farmer's tractor to drag the FJ out before it sunk beneath the waves. It took me a long time to get over that one too."

Jeff went to university in Adelaide to study mining engineering but missed some of his final second year exams because the surf was up. His father finally lost patience. He was offered the choice from two jobs his father had arranged so that young Jeff could 'do some growing up': either working for 12 months as a chef in Antarctica ... or becoming a patrol officer in Papua New Guinea. The second option looked better.

After six months' training (and surfing) in Sydney, from the age of 20 he spent nearly four pretty tough years in Port Moresby and northern PNG.

In 1973, Jeff arrived in WA for a holiday and took up pegging mining leases with some mates in the eastern goldfields. They sold the leases in the front bar of Kalgoorlie's Palace Hotel and he 'retired' on the proceeds to go surfing and hang out at Scarborough Beach for a year "because it was a great place to meet girls."

He then enrolled at the WA Institute of Technology – now Curtin University – and picked the easiest subjects he could find: Economics and Asian Studies. After being implored at the end of the first year by his lecturer in Indonesian to please give up the subject and stop "brutalising his language", Jeff left university to work with the Kailis family at Fremantle's wet fish markets. But at WAIT he'd also met Amy, who was

studying Japanese. So, while his final brief bid for tertiary education honours did not deliver a degree, he did win a life-long prize of a different kind.

Drawing on some of the business lessons he learned from the astute and successful Kailis clan, Jeff started a small flexible packaging company. He grew it over the years to become an Australian-wide operation and also expanded to the US west coast "so I got to ride all the famous Californian breaks and enjoy the Californian beach life."

After some 25 years, he sold the packaging business to the giant Amcor group and not long after moved into the wine business. And the rest is now WA wine industry history.

Overseas, he's taken surfing holidays with the family at Legian on Bali; travelled down from California to Baja in northern Mexico; ridden most of the main breaks on Hawaii's North Shore; been to the Maldives three times; plus visited Biarritz in France "but it was the wrong time of the year and we didn't get good surf there..."

"San Diego in California has some fantastic waves and it's a bit warmer than the more famous US west coast spots like Malibu, so it's more fun ... We surfed Wiamea Bay in Hawaii when it was small and I still got cleaned up by the shore break ... Sunset at six-to-seven feet was great."

Asked to pick his favourite surf spot around the world, goofy-footer Jeff nominates a classic left: "I think Pasta Point on the Maldives is hard to beat. It's got size and power with some great sections but is still pretty cruisy. The tide also helps carry you

out into the line-up. And with your mates sitting at the bar on the point watching, it's just a fantastic place to be."

Jeff now has three Mark Ogram/Yahoo Mals from Dunsborough but mainly rides an 8'2", three-fin model. He also has a 7'6" fat, shortboard with a stainless steel stringer made by mate John "Jacko" Jakovich at Cowaramup.

"I don't spend much time down south in WA in winter any more – it's just gets too cold when you get older. But the family spends most of December, January and February at the Yallingup beach house every summer," Jeff said. "I love Three Bears best in midweek in October-November and March-April. I also like catching a surf at Other Side of the Moon, Windmills, Injidup, Moses Rock, Gallows and Guillotines."

Jeff's next journey overseas will be a boys' golf trip to Scotland. And then his wife Amy will join him at a small cottage in France's famous Burgundy wine region which he purchased with a group of Australian mates a few years ago.

"Sitting amongst the grape vines, sipping some local wines, what could be better than that," Jeff says. "We can't make enough Howard Park and MadFish wine to meet the demand in Australia and overseas. So I know I can relax because the business back home is in good hands."

Jeff Burch might have been a mad bugger when he was a young surfer but now he's mellowing into a classic vintage longboarder.

*A classic regional  
vista – rows of vines  
against a backdrop of  
eucalyptus.*

