

Margaret Crittenden

Marg was an only child, born at St Andrew's Presbyterian Hospital East Melbourne, to Jack and Marion Down, on the 18th of October 1942. Upon leaving hospital, Marg was taken to the family home at Domain Rd South Yarra. She spent all her childhood and teenage years living in South Yarra and Prahran and her entire school life was spent at Melbourne Girl's Grammar in South Yarra, where friendships formed and endured until the end of her life.

Marg demonstrated her sense of adventure at an early age by frequently, unbeknown to her parents, escaping through her bedroom window to hitch a ride in the early dawn light on the horse drawn milk carts around the streets of Prahran. It was this exposure to horses, including harnessing and feeding them at the milk depot stables, that gave her a life-long love of them. She became a member of a suburban pony club in her teens and was very enthusiastic and supportive when daughter Zoe became interested in horses 20 years on. But more about that later. Marg of course also used the same window escape route in her early teenage years, to meet up with some of the local lads!

On leaving school, she entered the nursing academy at The Alfred Hospital in Commercial Rd and lived for part of her time in the student nurses' accommodation there. Goodness knows what larks she and her fellow students got up to, given it was a time of liberation for the young, heralded by pop groups such as The Beatles.



Margaret on her graduation day

Graduating in 1963, Marg continued to work at The Alfred until the call of Europe beckoned, as it did in those days for so many girls in their late teens and early twenties. Embarking in Melbourne on the SS Orcades in 1965, Marg ended up in London. She then travelled around England, Scotland and Wales, before taking a job, of all places, at a mink farm in Southern England. The possible highlight of her time away was purchasing an Austin A30, shipping it across the channel to France (goodness knows how), and with a girlfriend, spending months driving around France, Spain, Italy, Germany and perhaps the ultimate adventure for the cold war period, going as far east as and travelling around Czechoslovakia.

Marg returned to Australia via the Panama Canal, travelling through the Pacific, briefly stopping in New Zealand, and then home to Australia, where she resumed her nursing career. By the late 1960s, her parents had moved to North Balwyn, so Marg purchased a flat in the conservative suburb of Hawthorn, which is where she was living when she met Garry through mutual friends in 1969.

By now, she had left the disruptive shift work of day to day hospital nursing, and had secured a job in the pathology research laboratory at Prince Henry's Hospital in St Kilda Rd. After a courtship lasting 2 years, the happy couple were married in Christ Church South Yarra on the 26th of February 1972, and in lieu of a honeymoon, the groom gave his new bride a toaster and a washing machine.



Margaret and Garry on their wedding day.

Garry had started Crittenden's Nursery in Mt Eliza in 1967, specialising in the then increasingly popular Australian native plants. For a while, they lived in Marg's flat in Hawthorn and Garry drove to the Peninsula 7 days a week. Such were the nurseries opening hours. Eventually the rigours of driving over an hour in each direction daily, before the advent of freeways, became too much, so they decided to pick up sticks and move down to the Peninsula, purchasing a house in Birdrock Ave Mt Martha in 1973. They spent the next two years there, and their first born, daughter Zoe, came into being at Frankston Hospital on Christmas Eve 1974.

By now, Marg was working in a private pathology service lab in Frankston and the daily travel and once again odd hours, became a bit onerous on life with a new child, so the decision was made to move closer to her work. That is how the family came to purchase 106 Kars St Frankston in 1975; a landmark house in the locality, due to its mock Tudor façade and ample gardens on three building blocks, enough for a large vegetable garden indeed.

The house was in need of some love and attention, so Marg relished the opportunity to show her flair for period decoration by giving the interior a thorough make over. Garry satisfied himself by digging a wine cellar under the house for his ever-growing collection of bottles. It was while living there, that Rollo entered the world on the 13th of June 1976, eighteen months after Zoe.

In 1978, the family took a holiday, driving a hire car around Tasmania (Zoe was four and Rollo two and a half at the time), including getting bogged and rescued on an abandoned rail track on the West Coast near Strachan (Garry was driving). On that holiday, the family had dinner one night in Hobart at a restaurant purporting to sell Tasmanian wine; something Marg and Garry had never heard of. After being convinced by the waiter that it was legitimate and being given a name and address, they returned to the motel where Garry rang the now legendary Claudio Alcorso at 9pm.

Claudio generously granted a meeting at Morilla Estate the following day and tasted them through his astonishing range of virtually unknown wines, grown on his property at Berridale on the Derwent River in the northern suburbs of Hobart – known today as Mona. The rest, as they say, is history.

Mulling it over for a few weeks after returning from the holiday, Garry proposed over dinner one evening that maybe the family should sell up everything and move to Tasmania to plant a vineyard. Margaret quietly observed that “you might find it a little lonely”. (That said, exactly 9 years later in 1987, they did plant a vineyard in the Coal River Valley near Hobart with Margaret’s full support).

Back on the mainland, the kids were in preschool and prep at Minimbah in Frankston where the family got to know, surprise surprise, one of the first vineyard owners on the Mornington Peninsula, Nat White of Main Ridge Estate. It took little time to convince Marg that it could be a bit of fun to plant a vineyard somewhere on the Peninsula, especially, as she realised that she and the kids would be able to have horses on a country property, unlike Frankston.

After spending the best part of a year combing the Peninsula for likely sites, they eventually found and purchased the place they still occupy to this day in Dromana. And they didn’t have to sell up everything either, just the family home. The nursery business remained intact for the time being.

In September of 1982, family and friends gathered to plant on the property over one weekend, the first 5 acres (two hectares) of vines, and in so doing, doubled the entire aggregated area of vines planted on the Mornington Peninsula at that time, from five to ten acres. Naturally, Margaret provided a sumptuous lunch on both days for the assembled multitude.



Garry and Marg toasting the opening of the new cellar door

Margaret embraced farm life enthusiastically, from planting the vines in 1982, to providing the workers with generous lunches and designing her dream home, which in 1984, after their first vintage, the family moved into. Today, it still stands and serves as the office in one part, and the Wine Centre in another. As the years rolled on, Marg was the mainstay of the family and for many years during the 10 to 12 weeks of vintage from March to May, she provided endless meals for family, friends and itinerant workers engaged in the process; so much so, that it gave her the inspiration for what became her crowning glory - her restaurant and wine-tasting room, which today houses Stillwater Restaurant.

How she ever found time to continue her normal pathology career, raise two boisterous children and put up with an absent-minded husband, beggar’s belief.

Marg's lifelong ambition to have horses came to fruition, and she and Zoe cared for them. Zoe's interest in horses increasingly grew, until she was regularly riding competitively. Marg thought nothing of getting up before dawn on cold and rainy winter's mornings to hitch up the horse float, load the horses and a lunch basket, and head off to Pony Club. On the only occasion Garry was asked to fill in and be the float driver, he took a corner too fast, the horse slid and fell onto its side and it took a half hour to get it, luckily uninjured, upright on its feet. Needless to say, Garry wasn't asked again.

Zoe completed her schooling at Toorak College and went to Swinburne University to do a psychology major, followed by a teaching career which went on to include post-graduate degrees in education at Melbourne Uni and Monash, and teaching in the public and private education sector.

She returned to the family business in 2004 and is a major contributor to its ongoing success.

Rollo completed his schooling at Peninsula Grammar and attended Charles Sturt University in Wagga to study winemaking and spent vintages in the King Valley, Hunter Valley, Oregon, California and Piemonte in Italy, by way of gaining exposure to broader industry matters. Today, he heads up the family business and serves as President of the local vigneron's association, as well as sitting on a number of national industry boards and committees. Margaret was justifiably immensely proud of her children's achievements and was hoping to see her grandchildren follow suit and flourish in their careers.



The Crittenden family

There are two things that should be highlighted about Margaret's contribution to the family wine business, as well as her MAJOR contribution to the broader Mornington Peninsula Wine Industry. Almost by sleight of hand, Margaret erected a trestle table in the then winery building, during the January 1988 summer holidays. With nothing more than a notepad, pen and a cash tin (there was no such thing as a till or credit card devices in those days), she opened the Peninsula's first "Cellar Door."

By sleight of hand? Yes, Garry didn't know, as he was away at the London Wine Trade Fair aiming to develop an export market. He only found out about Marg's "cellar door" when he returned home in early February after the summer holidays were over. She was so taken with the potential, she went on to conceptualise, design and build her real cellar door AND restaurant, and worked behind the stoves there, 7 days a week, for the next 13 years after opening in 1992.

It was, categorically, the first cellar door restaurant on the Mornington Peninsula. Today, it still operates as Stillwater Restaurant.

After Marg hung up her apron in 2005, she then went on to conceptualise, design, build and manage (for the next 5 years), the three multi tourism award winning Lakeside Villas, that adorn the lake on the property and are today so ably managed by Rollo's wife Linda.

A leader and innovator of her time, Marg made such an immense contribution to the Peninsula Wine industry. In 2003 Garry was inducted as a Legend by the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival for his contribution to the Wine Industry in Victoria. He firmly believes Marg would have been a more worthy recipient of that honour, for the years of unstinting service and sacrifice she made on behalf of the wine, food and tourism industries of our state.

For the last ten years, despite Margaret's health decline, she never complained and always remained positive.

Marg will be remembered as a devoted wife to Garry, Mum to Zoe and Rollo, Granny to Finn, Maia, Oscar and Digby, and a very loyal friend to countless others.

By Garry Crittenden

