

Vineyard life in the eighties

In the late seventies and early eighties, the wine industry on the Mornington Peninsula was virtually non-existent. Rollo and I were both born locally - in Frankston Hospital - but my dad's dream of having his own vineyard always involved a move to Tasmania where he would be able to grow and make the cool climate wines he dreamed of. It turns out that the shift across Bass Strait wouldn't in fact be necessary.

As timing would have it, he stumbled upon a similar style of wine that was grown here in his own backyard. Nat White of Main Ridge Estate quickly became a close friend of Garry's having planted his vines just a couple of years prior. Other wineries from this time were Stoniers, Merricks Estate, Elgee Park and Moorooduc Estate. Soon a group of likeminded families had grouped together to help one another out. This helping seemed to involve a lot of drinking. Many an evening of food and wine was had with us kids being left to hang out together. I recall especially fondly the evenings at the Keffords (of Merricks Estate); they had turned an old oak cask into a hot tub and us kids would all cram into it - toddlers to teenagers - unsupervised and left to our own devices. Eighties parenting at its finest.

As a family weekends were spent traipsing around the Peninsula to examine paddocks that could be turned into a vineyard. No iPhones of course, so Rollo and I simply had to occupy ourselves with bickering. Eventually a 27 acre site was found in Dromana, and once the horses were removed the first thing to do was to build a lake. Although despite its "lake" title today, for many years it was simply the dam, built with the purpose of irrigation for the vines to come.



Building of the dam 1982

In 1982 we planted five acres of vines largely consisting of Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and a little Pinot Noir. These vines doubled combined existing plantings on the Peninsula bringing the total area to ten acres across the whole of the region. There are now in excess of 2000 acres and possibly 80 different vineyards throughout, many without a winery attached. (In fact, we are one of the few who have our winery here onsite on the Peninsula).

In 1983 the first fruit from the vines was picked; a very small crop of Pinot Noir. Sadly, however, the results of our labour met an untimely end. With no wine making facilities of our own the fruit, once picked, was sent to a friend's very basic winery set up where it was crushed and the ferment commenced. It was stored in glass demijohns but when checked in the weeks to come, had been stolen.

The thinking (by some) at the time was that the French had caught wind of the fact that Aussies on the Peninsula were making a Pinot that rivaled their Burgundies and that spies were sent to steal and analyse this miraculous drop! This is how Garry tells the story anyway. The reality was more likely kids looking for tools to steal stumbling upon partially fermented wine. So sadly, our historical first vintage was most likely guzzled by a bunch of thieves – who were never caught.

A couple of years later our first real harvest in 1984 was ready to be picked. It was across two Sundays with a large handful of willing pickers who would be rewarded with one of Margaret's lunches upon the completion of their work. This was the way things were done back then – friends and family were more than willing to assist just to later be able to. Mum's cooking was already becoming well known and it was perhaps at this time that her ideas and dreams of an onsite restaurant commenced (stay tuned for a later installment for details of how this dream became a reality!).

When the first fruit made it into bottle a couple of years later Garry would have no doubt proudly shared it with friends and family – a 1984 Cabernet Sauvignon. Mum and Dad were very social and wonderful entertainers; they did it all so well. An amazing and dynamic team – he made the wine and she would cook up a storm. Now, we have just harvested our thirty-seventh vintage from these same vines; although the Cabernet was grafted to Pinot Noir in 2007 after finally realising that it was in fact Pinot that we loved to grow, make and drink!

Vintage throughout those early years always involved very cool (in my young eyes) foreign workers who would stay in our home and work 14 or more hour days. Dinners for a large hoard were a feature of autumn, again supplied by Marg and featured the rustic fare she did so well, along with interesting people and many a laugh. After dinner the workers, Garry and from about the age of 15 Rollo as well, would traipse out again to finish the day's crushing. I recall Dad's Benson and Hedges sitting on top of the fridge – a habit only taken up for those two months of the year when the stress of vintage would allow such an indulgence!



Family and friends planting first vines in 1982



Vintage 1984 using a "basket press"



Cabernet vines 1983



Vintage 1984 - Cabernet fruit



Garry sharing the first bottle with friends

So much has changed and whilst vintage looks a little different (do they still smoke Benson and Hedges??) the laughs throughout this special time continue.

I adore the smell of freshly pressed grapes that greets me as I arrive at work each day and am instantly taken back to these exciting times from my youth. I can't quite believe that I am able to work in this family business, along side my brother (the bickering having mostly diminished) doing something that I simply love. My children are also growing up amongst the vines and I look at their youthful innocence and the way that they take this lifestyle for granted. I know that they will grow up and like me, at some stage reflect on their lives, realising only later how blessed they are to be a part of a winery family and this remarkable industry.

Zoe Crittenden



Early days on the farm with friends helping out