
Tête à Tête

News from Stoney Vineyard

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The Swiss connection

Is history about to repeat itself? Ruth and Peter Althaus's decision to leave their Swiss homeland and move to Tasmania to become pioneers in cool climate viticulture in the Coal River Valley prompts recollections of the early days of Victoria's wine industry.

The focal point of Australian cool climate winemaking in the 1990s, the Victorian wine industry owes much of its success - both today's and that of yesteryear - to its Swiss connections made over a century-and-a-half ago.

A range of European immigrants have dominated the development of Australia's warm climate viticulture - principally Germans in the Barossa Valley, Yugoslavs in the Swan Valley and Italians in the Griffith/Riverina district. However, no group can claim to have made greater contributions to cool climate viticulture in this country than those made by the Swiss who came to Victoria during the 1840s and 1850s.

In fact, that state's first wine was grown and made by a Swiss, a man named Dardel. Vintaged in 1845, it was produced at the cattle property of Yering, owned by the Ryrie brothers at Lillydale in the Yarra Valley. The Yering vineyard was planted to Black Cluster and Sweetwater - the 19th century names for Pinot Noir and Chasse-las.

The cuttings came from the famous Camden vineyard of Captain John Macarthur.



In all probability, Macarthur had collected this stock from Swiss vineyards visited during his tour of Europe in 1815 and 1816.

A stream of Swiss connections began with the arrival in Victoria of an Englishman, Charles La Trobe, in 1839.

Appointed Superintendent for Port Phillip, and later, from 1851, the first Governor of Victoria, La Trobe had lived and had been educated in Switzerland. There he came to acquire knowledge and appreciation of wine.

La Trobe and his wife Sophie, the Neuchatel-born daughter of the Swiss Counsellor of State, arrived to find almost everyone in the colony was English, and drank the heavy wines of Spain and

Portugal. They were soon determined to introduce some sophistication to the culture and habits of the colonists.

A vineyard was planted in the grounds of what was to become Melbourne's Government House. The La Trobe's Swiss housekeeper Rose, and her husband Amiet Pelet, also established a vineyard nearby.

Between them, the La Trobes set about encouraging their Swiss friends and family members to join them in founding an infant industry in the colony.

These immigrants, unlike most others, were wealthy and well connected. Well-educated, they had a thorough knowledge and

understanding of viticulture in a cool climate.

Soon among them were David Pettavel and Frederick Broquet, who had left the French-speaking Canton of Neuchatel on the word of Sophie La Trobe.

Pettavel and Broquet, armed with cuttings from Dijon, Burgundy, established Geelong's first vineyard, Victoria Vineyard, in 1842.

Later, Pettavel planted a second vineyard in Geelong in 1857, called Prince Albert Vineyard. He seems to have been highly regarded in his day. His expertise in ploughing and trenching techniques used in establishing vineyards are mentioned in detail in A.C. Kelly's 1861 treatise, *The Vine In Australia*.

By the 1860s, the vineyards around Geelong had grown to 400ha to become the biggest and most important in the state, with the families of some 11 Swiss immigrants residing in the district.

Its acclaim spread far and wide, as far away as Bordeaux and Paris, and culminated with the visit to Pettavel's Prince Albert Vineyard by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1867.

The La Trobe's influence also encouraged land-holding in what today is regarded as this country's pre-eminent region for cool climate viticulture.

Foremost among the Swiss immigrants there was Paul de Castella, who arrived in the colony in 1848. Within a year, he had purchased part of the Ryries' Yering station to establish a vineyard. The son of a wealthy Gruyere physician, Paul de Castella made good use of his family connections.

During the period 1855 - 1857, some 200 000 vine cuttings were obtained, chiefly from Bordeaux's exulted Chateau Lafite, and his

vineyard grew to 40ha. In 1861, it won the 100-guinea gold cup offered by Melbourne's *The Argus* newspaper for the best vineyard in Victoria.

De Castella's enterprise went on to win major awards at the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, at a similar event in Vienna in 1863 (where the French judges walked out, incorrectly believing they had been duped by the substitution of French wines for Australian), at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, and at the 1889 Paris Exposition (where it was the winner of the only Grand Prix given to a vineyard in the southern hemisphere).

A cousin of de Castella and nephew of Mrs. La Trobe, Baron Guillaume de Pury arrived in the colony in 1852. He bought part of Yering and established a 25ha vineyard.

Yeringberg today is not only one of the Yarra Valley's most prestigious estates, it is the oldest Victorian vineyard still in the hands of its original family owners.

Assisting de Pury at Yeringberg in the 1850s was one Joseph Clement Deschamps, who came to Victoria at the La Trobe's encouragement in 1854.

Deschamps, whose family a generation before had moved from Burgundy to Switzerland in the aftermath of the French Revolution, had been a vigneron in a prominent vineyard in his homeland. He found himself in de Pury's employment after his own attempts at Kyncton were ruined by successive frosts and bushfires.

His time at Yeringberg was highly profitable, for he made a number of wines that won international prizes for de Pury. By the 1860s, each of his 3 sons also had vineyards at Lillydale. It was a thriving community of some 23 Swiss families whose business

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enterprises included winemaking, splitting and selling vine-stakes and fence posts, and even cooperage.

Swiss domination of Yarra Valley viticulture was all but made complete by the arrival of Hubert de Castella in 1854. Having recently married a wealthy heiress in Europe, he purchased a portion of Yering from his bother Paul, naming it St. Huberts.

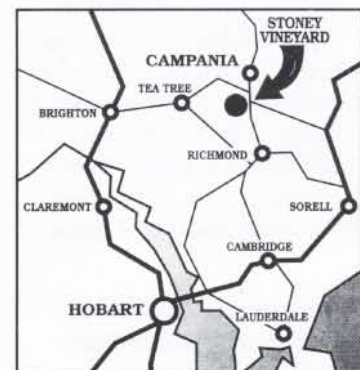
St. Huberts was immediately planted to 40ha of vines. By 1875, it was twice as large. It doubled again by the 1890s - an impressive accomplishment, even by today's standards.

In the halcyon days of the 1880s, the vineyard won many prizes. At the great Melbourne International Exhibition of 1881, it was awarded the Emperor's Prize for the most meritorious exhibit in the whole show.

Separately and in combination, the 19th century vineyards of St. Huberts, Yering and Yeringberg brought to the Yarra Valley a reputation second to none, a reputation founded on the production of fine, European-styled table wines.

Our history has already richly rewarded the endeavour and optimism of those first Swiss pioneers.

How history rewards the endeavour and optimism of Ruth and Peter Althaus in their pioneering pursuits in Australia's newest wine region only time will tell.



CORK TALK

It's hard to believe that as we near the end of the 20th century we still continue to plug bottles of fine wine with what amounts to a lump of wood - albeit, the bark from the highly prized quercus suber.

Hard to believe, but true.

Certainly, cork has its advantages. It's light in weight, is practically impermeable to liquids, and is a poor conductor of heat and vibration. Most importantly, it is highly elastic. It can be compressed a great deal, yet springs back readily into its original shape when released.

As a stopper, cork is not without its problems, however. In recent times we, too, have been plagued by the problems with cork which beset our industry as a whole.

There are 7 grades of cork quality. In spite of our practice of always buying first-grade quality corks for our wines, in 1994 we encountered a batch of corks which seemed a little old and out of condition. Soft enough to be compressed into their bottles, some did not expand immediately after bottling to ensure completely airtight sealing of our wines. Some leakages occurred.

Fortunately, because of our practice of leaving our wines in storage for 3 months before labels and capsules are added, we were able to detect and remedy the problem.

Adjustments have been made to our bottling procedures to help eliminate future problems. Each bottle now is filled accurately with 750ml of wine, leaving a useful airspace in the neck above the cork. Any additional wine would reduce the air space, creating the possibility that small changes in temperature can cause a cork to lose its airtight seal or even be forced out of its bottle.

We also ensure that freshly sealed bottles remain upright for at least two minutes after corking - time for corks to recover their original shapes - before they are binned for storage.

Problems with cork taints continue to worry us. Presently, on a national industry basis, spoilage caused by bacteria in corks affects 5% to 8% of all bottled wines. We at Stoney Vineyard are not immune to these problems.

If you encounter a 'corked' bottle - the wine will smell dull or cardboardy, and will have a flat or corky flavour - you should expect to receive a replacement bottle free of charge.

For the long-term, the industry must consider alternative forms of closure for bottled wine. Already, we are investigating the possible use of roll-on, pilferproof (Stelvin) closures for all Stoney Vineyard wines.

Stelvin caps have been used on some Australian wines since 1976. Apart from eliminating problems with 'corked' wines, they have been reliable, cost-effective performers for almost 30 years. Under conditions of long-term cellaring, Stelvin-capped wines retain their youth and freshness to a remarkable degree, much more so than their conventionally sealed counterparts.

Is it time for the industry to reconsider the Stelvin's use in sealing premium quality bottled wine? We think so.

VINTAGE REPORT

For those of us at Stoney Vineyard, vintage '95 meant business as usual. Unlike last year, when we had a difficult season and a very small crop of exceptional quality fruit, this year's harvest went very much according to Mother Nature's plan.

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From our 7ha of bearing vines, we picked just over 40 tonnes of high quality fruit. We continue to maintain low yields from our vines so that we can ensure the very best products go into our range of wines.

The key words for the wines of 1995 will be 'elegance' and 'balance'. In the main, our wines are very aromatic, medium in body, and show strong varietal flavours.

Our vines awoke from their winter dormancy of 1994 with budburst for early-ripening varieties occurring in late September. New Cabernet Sauvignon buds began to open around the 10th of October.

Our vines weathered the typically windy, drizzly days of November, and a normal flowering took place during the very dry month of December. We had only a little rain during January, and so we were forced to drip irrigate our thirsty vines during their period of vegetative growth. Without it, we would have had insufficient foliage to fully ripen our '95 crop, and little wood to lay down for the following year's harvest.

Veraison - the onset of ripening marked by a colour change in grape berries - occurred as normal during early February. At that time, we bunch-thinned our older vines of Pinot Noir. Twenty-five percent of our potential crop here was left to rot on the ground in order to ensure our remaining bunches developed the concentrated aromas and flavours we look for in our Domaine A wines.

In contrast to the hen-and-chicken bunches of '94 - bunches with large, fertilized berries accompanied by smaller, unfertilized berries - our fruit set during 1995 was very even. Across our vineyards, bunches harvested were uniform and well-ripened.

Vintage 1995 began with the picking of a good crop of Pinot Noir in early March. From the middle of that month, the weather began to cool appreciably. Premature leaf-fall in part of our vineyard due to frost on the 16th March prompted the early picking of a small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc for our Stoney Vineyard Aurora wine.

A mild autumn failed to interrupt our normal schedule of picking. Our Coal River Valley site remained warmer than most other areas of the state, and harvesting was completed by the end of April. Good yields of Sauvignon Blanc and the Bordeaux red varieties - Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, and Petit Verdot - were picked in healthy condition, free of disease.

As in 1994, we made a single barrel of 100% Merlot, which we hope to bottle in 1997.

WINES FOR SALE

1995 STONEY VINEYARD AURORA

Aurora is the mythological Roman Goddess of the Dawn. Our Stoney Vineyard Aurora is a dry white wine made by the whole-bunch pressing of red and white grape varieties, mainly Cabernet Franc, but with the addition of a little Cabernet Sauvignon, Sylvaner, and Gewurztraminer. Entirely estate-grown, it is a very crisp wine with delightful aromas and flavours, lighter in body and lower in alcohol than our first vintage in 1994. Higher in acidity as well, it is an obvious refinement of a style that proved to be very popular over the past year. It matches well with Asian cuisine, and is also suited to accompany asparagus, smoked salmon pates and other entrees.

1995 STONEY VINEYARD SAUVIGNON BLANC

Our Sauvignon Blanc is quite different in style to herbaceous/asparagus wines of cool climate regions such as Marlborough, New Zealand. This is a dry white wine with plenty of ripe fruit character. An aroma typical of fully ripened Sauvignon Blanc is matched by flavours reminiscent of tropical fruit. It drinks well with seafood - especially with crayfish and other crustaceans - and is a wine to enjoy as an aperitif as well. It speaks for itself!

1995 STONEY VINEYARD PINOT NOIR

Our first Pinot Noir under the Stoney Vineyard label, this is a soft and seductive red wine made from 100% Pinot Noir grown on a north-facing slope in a single vineyard. It has typical red berry flavours and a velvety mouthfeel, undisturbed by the influence of oak treatment.

A wine to enjoy with white meat, pheasant, duck, quail, and other game, or to enjoy on its own for its delicious aromas.

1993 STONEY VINEYARD CABERNET SAUVIGNON

The product of a long, warm ripening season, this is a smooth, round wine that is beginning to drink well now. Matured in used French oak for one year, and showing the benefits of a year in the bottle as well, it is a dry red typical of this site. With a little Cabernet Franc to enhance the flavour, it also has a structure to reward the patient. For cellaring over the next decade, this wine is also offered for sale en magnum.

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1994 DOMAINE A PINOT NOIR

Like all of our '94s, this is a substantial wine, with characteristics resembling top quality Burgundy as well as our '92 vintage Domaine A Pinot Noir. Oak matured in used French barrels - no new oak is ever used for our Pinot Noir - it is a wine for keeping despite its approachability. Sadly, a mere 550 bottles of this exceptional wine were produced.

1993 DOMAINE A CABERNET SAUVIGNON

As usual, this is our best wine crafted from the Bordeaux family of grape varieties. Similar in style to our '91 vintage, and with body and weight approaching our '92, it is an elegant dry red wine. Kept for 2 years in new French oak barriques, it shows the intense aromas and flavours typical of fully ripened, cool climate Cabernet Sauvignon. With a very good structure of acids and tannins, the wine should be kept for future enjoyment, say in 10 years.

INVITATION

Please visit our vineyard and the new winery. Taste our wines and collect your orders.

**November 25 and 26 1995
from 10.30 am to 5.00 pm**

**Domaine A / Stoney Vineyard
H. Peter and Ruth ALTHAUS
CAMPANIA TAS 7026**