

Winemaker Profile

HOWARD ANDERSON - RUTHERGLEN

While delivering the February Dozen, it was good to catch up with a number of participants including Ron. Talking with him is always busy and enjoyable, and for some reason the conversation got onto the subject of sparkling wines. Soon his whole focus locked, as he remembered an evening, a meal, and a bottle of Seppelt Great Western Sparkling Burgundy, vintage 1946. "The best sparkling wine I've ever had, and maybe the best wine." Ron had just delivered early warning approval for the May Winemaker Profile.

Howard Anderson of Rutherglen is a minimalist fortified wine producer. He is a dedicated agent to the cause of seeking to develop the best possible sparkling wine styles, with reds his particular passion.

From school days in Griffith in New South Wales, finishing dux, Howard took up a position as a trainee winemaker at Rossetto Wines at Beelbangera near Griffith. There was no history of winemaking in his family, but the adventure, and the chemistry of wine related subjects of study were appealing.

Howard began a 15-year stint at Seppelt in 1971. Early on, one of those inspirational moments happened. He had the chance to taste their 1944 and 1946 Sparkling Burgundies, as they were then called. He was knocked-out by their grandeur, their absolute class. Clearly a privileged experience that helped shape a considerable portion of his winemaking career. (In Halliday's "Classic wines of Australia" these Shiraz based wines were described in a 1994 tasting as "remarkable" and "magnificent" respectively).

In 1975 Howard enrolled in the winemaking degree at Wagga Wagga, now CSU to study by distance education. A long arduous five years of part time academia - a hard way to obtain a degree considering the demands of winemaking duties at Great Western.

The Anderson Winery and Champenoise Cellar was established in 1993, a year after the first vineyard plantings. In the March 2003 Cellar Club Release, the Order Form lists four sparkling whites (Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir / Chardonnay Blends); three Sparkling Shiraz wines; four white table wines (Chenin Blanc and a variety of Chardonnay offerings); nine reds (some Shiraz wines, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon plus blends and a first release Durif 2001); and finally two dessert wines including a 1977 Late Harvest Tokay.

Anderson Winery produces a remarkable range of wines for a relatively small winery. Survival for a smaller producer can be a complex business and Howard admits to a very challenging 10 years. Reliance on banks and their demanding and often fickle ways, together with an ever-changing and developing market place made the going very difficult.

Along the way he has built up his contract winemaking to the point where he currently makes more wine in this role than he does under his own label. It has proved elementary to survival, providing life giving cash flow in a business where a significant proportion of potential sales remain suspended in bottles, on lees, or in riddling racks. This is a significant extra cost to be absorbed. A burden-born of a specialization not experienced by most other small producers. Such is sparkling wine!

Like many smaller producers, Howard would prefer not to rely so much, if at all on contract winemaking, and do his own thing. Such “own things” provide the real value of the smaller producer to grateful consumers. And a value often beyond the measuring scale of some accountants.

Through the tough times experimenting with wine styles is natural. Sparkling Merlot is an example. But with Sparkling Shiraz, Howard is confident that in the future he will be able to produce more powerful wines. From the 2000 Vintage, eight years after planting, he is using fruit from his own vineyard, cropping them at a low 1.3 tonne per acre. He is very pleased with the 2001 and 2002 base wines, and this fact is noted.

In all, survival of the Anderson Winery with its focus on sparkling wines has “somehow” been accomplished. Talking with Howard and indeed with other small producers, the difficulty of maintaining sales and attracting new ones soon comes up. From a re-seller’s point of view, it is impossible to experience the worries of this issue to the extent of the small proprietor winemaker, while they sit on the fringe of wider discovery.

Local wine consumption has increased significantly over the last thirty years imbedding it deeper into our culture. Given this, and with almost static domestic growth, economic cycles will sort out all producers’ determination to maintain their faith to continue. This doesn’t provide Howard with any guarantees of a more secure future. Maybe it is his vigilance as a survivor that holds firm, but in the equation of the unknown, and certain to make its play, is ‘fashion’, that in a much more precise context than it usually conjures up, with people’s predictable desire to drink wines made with single mindedness and passion.

Howard talks proudly of his daughter, Christobelle, now in her final year of wine science at Adelaide University. He expects her to travel the winemaking world and probably in time, take up some senior production position. Who knows what creative seeds have been sewn? Maybe together, they will further “develop the best possible sparkling styles” for a living, growing and increasingly sophisticated market.

Note: Disgorgement of the 1998 Sparkling Shiraz will occur later this year. I have spoken to Howard of the possibility in having a small amount for a proposed six-pack of sparkling wines for December. Typically, disgorgement runs at Andersons are limited.

(Disgorgement: process of preparing the wine for the market place. After an extended period of riddling, the upside down bottle traps unwanted lees in the cap. The cap is frozen and then expelled. Finally the wine is topped up according to style with Dosage (*liqueur d’expédition*) before being re-corked.)

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