

Winemaker Profile

ANDREW BIRKS - BIDGEEBONG TRIANGLE

Bidgeebong Wines became a reality only after stage two and after the two public faces "talked and dreamed about the project over a period of three years." That is Andrew Birks, the Winemaker and Simon Robertson the Viticulturist. The other two Founding Directors are Garry Cummins and DD Saxena.

"Bidgeebong Wines come from the south-west slopes of NSW - an area beginning to emerge as a source of some of Australia's most interesting and exciting premium and super-premium wines.

The 'Bidgeebong Triangle' encompasses Tumbarumba in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, the Hilltops district centred on Young and the Murrumbidgee plain around Gundagai on the Hume Highway, about halfway between Sydney and Melbourne.

The name Bidgeebong is a combination of Murrumbidgee and billabong. The Murrumbidgee River is the lifeline of the region. Billabongs, meaning 'places of still water' in the Wiradjuri language, were the gathering places of the original owners of the area, the Wiradjuri tribe. The Wiradjuri occupied this land from time immemorial until Irish farmers established and named the first stations hers in the 1800s.

Bidgeebong's reason for being is to create wines and wine styles that express the distinctive flavours and characters that result from being able to blend from three neighbouring areas with distinctly different climates and soils. Andrew will not shy away from making single-region, stand-alone wines if the fruit from one region within the 'Triangle' shines." Their own vineyard fires the Alabama Shiraz.

Andrew Birks is one of the Australian Wine Industry's most widely experienced and highly respected figures. He is a second-generation winemaker who has worked at Roseworthy, Wendouree with Roly Birks ('my long-lost uncle'), Lindemans Cellars in Corowa and at The College Winery at Wagga Wagga. His formal qualifications include a degree in Agricultural Science from the University of Melbourne.

He completed post-graduate winemaking studies in 1972 at Roseworthy (with Ron Liebich) South Australia and has since run dual careers as a winemaker and as an educator and consultant, both in Australia and internationally. He has trained a generation of Australian winemakers over more than 20 years (from 1978) at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. He supervised the University Winery and advised growers throughout the region.

Birks has also trained winemakers in France, Portugal and New Zealand, and made both table wines and fortifieds in Portugal. Fortified wines, including classical style Port and Fino Sherry, remain one of his not-so-secret passions.

The more Birks traveled the wine regions of the world, the more his belief grew in a wine future for the south-west slopes of NSW. He said 'I could see the potential for quality wine, and I realized that I understood as well or better than anyone how to handle the fruit in the winery.'

Their long held "sleeper" of an idea that the south-west slopes was a good area for wine grape growing, already had substantial evidence as seen in Barwang and Lindsay's Woodonga Hill wines in Young.

The other public face in the Bidgeebong story is Simon Robertson. "Robertson grew up in Young and studied Viticulture and Wine Science at Charles Sturt University. He worked in Europe, especially France and Hungary, for a number of years, returning in 1982 to manage the Barwang Vineyards, established at Young by his father, Peter, in 1969.

Since Barwang was sold to McWilliams in 1989, Robertson has built a viticultural management business that now services about 400 hectares of vineyards in the Tumbarumba and Gundagai regions.

However since the sale of the family property and winery, Simon has had a burning desire to again be directly involved in the production of premium wines. It was fate that Robertson and Birks should team up to work together.

The 'Bidgeebong Triangle,' the regions of Gundagai, Hilltops and Tumbarumba in the southern New South Wales foothills of Australia's highest mountain, Mt. Kosciusko, are all located within two hours of the winery at Wagga Wagga.

Grapes grown in Tumbarumba which has an alpine climate, is marginal for grapes even in warm years, are part of the available mix along with fruit from cool, elevated Young (Hilltops) and relatively low-lying Gundagai, with its consequently milder and warmer climate.

Nowhere in Australia, perhaps the world, can match the grape growing - and hence winemaking - flexibility of the 'Triangle.'

The winery will eventually be 'capable of handling' 2000 tonnes of grapes. It is envisaged that the winery, as well as meeting Bidgeebong Wine's own needs, will process grapes from other local growers and for larger producers who purchase grapes from the region."

It's all there and happening for the Bidgeebong partnership. An enormous wealth of talent both in the grape growing and winemaking is backed up with considerable understanding and experience in the world of business via the other two partners.

It is not a classic 20-acre plot run by a dedicated winemaker, the inspiration of small independent producers, it's a little different.

It has the 'regional sourcing' of grapes the medium and larger companies carry out but it comes down, in the end to the Bidgeebong label which is totally small winery in philosophy and winemaking. "Just a little different!"

Material from: The Bidgeebong Story given to me by Andrew Birks in Wagga Wagga in January 2004. 11-5-2004