

Winemaker Profile

ROBERT CRABTREE – CRABTREE OF WATERVALE

Instinctive first impressions when meeting people often stick, even if details of that first off occasion tend to be a bit of a blur. And some are memorable. It was my first visit to the Crabtree Cellar Door, and I was tagging along with an old college acquaintance, who had just started work with a new retail chain in Adelaide. I had tactically decided to maintain my presence as an observer, and keep mostly in the background. Alas, this was no defence. Both of us were ambushed and completely surrounded by Robert's enthusiasm.

The Cellar Door is at the front of their home, and is approached by a driveway. On arrival we were directed to the back of the house, the preferred place for visitors to park.

Eventually I began asking a few questions about distribution in NSW, and Robert became even more intense in his already heightened enthusiasm, with anything to do with wine. Leading with a smile, he said, "who are you and what do you want?" Cornered, I admitted to working in a bottle shop.

Another car nosed into the driveway, and my interrogator turned into a demonstrative traffic controller, wildly waving toward the back of the house. Completely mesmerised, the driver drove straight into a tree, prompting "why did he do that?" from the winemaker. Vaudevillian perfection, unrehearsed and no Director. All survived, including the tree, but they were about to experience something special.

As though nothing happened I was back under the lamp answering pointed questions. It was a memorable beginning to an enjoyable relationship that has produced some very amusing moments and a number of revelations.

All livestock at this establishment, whether quadrupeds or two legged and feathered, are pets. Last December I saw the last of a 'batch' of ducks leave. Kylie, the diva mother had just raised 18 young, in concert with drake, Dr. Bonk, as he is affectionately known. What stopped the fertile partnership at 18, heaven knows, but the Doctor is on the loose, and obviously at times seeks a welcome abandonment. There are many animal stories of interest here.

In the early 1990s Elizabeth Crabtree, on several occasions encouraged us to develop the natural links we had with other small wineries. She would say that visitors to their Cellar Door would often make mention of their growing dissatisfaction of how the market place had generally lost its appeal. People want something different.

Toward the end of 1997, the Crabtrees produced the best 'Winemaker Tasting' I've ever seen. Invitation only to the shop, it was a unique stand up act. The spontaneous response was extraordinary. There weren't another half a dozen Clare wineries to help add to the mix, just them. I can still clearly remember Robert looking shattered, sitting on a bale of straw, in the front window of the shop, late that Friday night.

Robert's professional background is in Law. After working for some time in a bank then a stockbroker's office, he studied Law at Oxford and became a Barrister. "I never enjoyed the life of a Barrister, and went into teaching Law in Cambridge at the College of Technology." In his spare time (huh?) he made wine from all sorts of fruit, blackberry being the most successful.

"There came a point when I wanted a total change of life and I went to France and got a job working for a small proprietor / winemaker near Bergerac in the Dordogne Department. I suddenly had a lot of responsibility and wine to make and found it very exciting."

After two years, a job offer in New Zealand was taken up, and the journey was extended, eventually, to Australia and the Clare Valley, at Auburn.

Permission to live in Australia was granted and it was to winemaking in partnership at what was then known as Watervale Cellars. After a couple of years the workforce was adjusted, with Robert now solo proprietor crushing about 30 tonnes. "I went to Roseworthy part time for what seemed 100 years and learned some theory." Probably that spare time thing!

"In late 1984 I met Elizabeth and we discovered together that the Glaetzer property in Watervale was for sale. We took a huge leap and bought it together and then got married." Eventually a winery was built here. The Auburn property was sold, and the next 15 years were dedicated to the reality of today, even the brand new Cellar Door toilets, a sort of demand and supply thing!

"Our vineyard is about 40% Riesling. For a decade this was a problem although I have long loved Riesling and believed in it for Watervale. We then bought the block across the road - 100% Riesling. How to minimise your income! Now I am glad to say there is a great deal more enthusiasm for Riesling, especially in Sydney and also Europe."

Crabtree wines are described as Clare in style, but do display a large twist of the maker. The portfolio is made up of Riesling, Late Harvest Riesling, Semillon, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache and a Cellar Door only indulgence, a Tawny Port. A taboo punishable by bar coding in the corporate world.

"We have no plans to expand, going against the trend of most of our neighbours in Clare. We grow and crush about 100 tonnes and sometimes I think that is too much. But now we have the pressure and responsibility of seeing it all through from beginning in the vineyard to end in the tasting and sales. In fact what my old French employer Jean Revol warned me against many years ago".

19.02.01