

Winemaker Profile

AL FENCAROS – ALLINDA – YARRA VALLEY

When a wine is included in a Dozen, and the 'Winemaker's Notes' arrive, it is always an interesting moment to see how they describe their wine. When Al's first wine came along, the 1998 Chardonnay, in the February 2000 Dozen, a new level was reached. He referred to "tactile excellence in winemaking.....a delicate balance between acidity and sweet sensations such as those contributed by residual sugar, alcohol and glycerol produced during fermentation. Silkiness coming from careful extraction of velvety tannins from the grapes and protein from yeast autolysis" Crafting a wine that 'feels' good in the mouth is one of Al's quests. Texture in sparkling wines is often stated and is certainly central to the cause. And you know when a wine is flat or slightly soft, acidity is a problem. Perhaps there were some things we take for granted in a wine. Al is right. How we initially nudge a vinous liquid in the mouth is very important. It's what 'turns the lights on' in a wine. His notes are fascinating as they reflect his science.

Al graduated with honours from Melbourne University as an industrial chemist, and his career began with him working in various high tech laboratories developing new applied technologies. But it was while in the paint industry his traditional seeds caught up with him. As he says, "while often intoxicating, paint odours were rarely pleasurable."

"Al's ancestors are from Hungary, where much wine was, and still is, made in very small cellars as part of mixed agricultural farming. As in all European families, wine for Al, as he was growing up, was an every day accompaniment to dinner. Dinner table discussions were often about his father's recollections of how 'they used to do it back home.' Curiosity lead him to graduate in Wine Science from Charles Sturt University, and from there his winemaking skills were honed along side winemakers at two prestigious Yarra Valley wineries."

It was all a matter of time and place. Although Al was gaining valuable practical experience in winery operations, he knew his future was not making the essentially commercial styles of the larger wineries. He was still keenly aware that with this sort of winemaking and ongoing consulting work in his industrial chemist hat, his "artistic flare couldn't be restrained or satisfied by the bureaucracy of corporate life."

"In 1990, an opportunity arose to purchase a small property well situated at the northern end of the Yarra Valley. With spectacular views from the hilltop, and a vineyard site in its lee, it is well sheltered from the troublesome northerly winds that prevail during flowering." Allinda had begun.

Essentially Allinda (Al and Linda) Yarra Valley is eight acres of vineyard supported by a well-equipped modern winery. The four wine styles produced by Al are Chardonnay, Riesling, Pinot Noir and the Cabernets, made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot.

The following ten years shaped what Allinda is today. The Yarra Valley of the 1990s underwent a type of rebirth. "A few vineyard owners started to think about adding value to

their produce by establishing their own label. At the time, the only option to investing large sums of money in building a winery and employing a winemaker, was to ask one of the large wineries to process fruit for them. These small parcels soon became a nuisance to large wineries whose focus was building their own brand. With a new winery equipped for small volumes, growers were referred to Al by the bigger wineries as a more appropriate facility to produce wine under contract for growers. With Al's passion being much more for winemaking than marketing, it wasn't long before contract winemaking became a core part of the winery operation."

This is in contrast to Howard Anderson's wish to get more into his own sparkling wine program. Al is happy to receive grapes from the six or so growers and undertake the winemaking with the natural characteristics of each vineyard in mind, as well as reflecting growers' wishes regarding style.

Al clearly revels in this activity and it highlights the contrast to Howard in Rutherglen. It became delightfully obvious in late 1999 when Al first took me on a barrel tour. For me it was a point in time when new life dawned in the Chardonnay style. He produces probably four unique wines with varying degrees of acceptability to the palate, which then do some time in quality wood before being blended. They represent the building blocks for the final wine, almost always a rich and elegant result. Tasting the component wines, you need a little imagination as to where Al's thoughts are taking you. Ultimately all you need is appreciation of Al's artful blending skill while enjoying the finished wine. I knew winemakers combine several or more ferments of Sauvignon Blanc to capture a range of that variety's flavours. In Chardonnay I had not experienced such emphatic wines, some eccentric that would make up a wine with such obvious class.

"Much can be said about the art and science of winemaking. Ultimately to produce wines of distinction, it is important to use our modern understanding of winemaking science to assure product quality. But even more importantly, to marry this with some of the traditional techniques that have been proven to go far beyond science in defining the character of wine. At Allinda we use the oft-neglected sense of touch as a focal point for our winemaking style. We believe that wines should not only stimulate your sense of sight, smell and taste, but also our tactile sense – the wine should feel pleasurable on the palate."

"Attaining tactile excellence also requires achieving high levels of amino acids through techniques such as extended contact with yeast lees. Perhaps most importantly of all, it requires much attention to phenolic composition through selective extraction of soft, drying tannins and minimization of hard, bitter tannins. At Allinda we are constantly working at optimizing our winemaking techniques to achieve the highest standards of quality in our wines."

In June, on a refreshingly misty and cool morning just before leaving, Al gave me a bottle each, of his Chardonnay and Cabernets. I gave him a bottle of the Canobolas-Smith Grenache / Shiraz, and his response was immediate. "Good to see the screw cap. In any other industry, a major defect rate of 6% would not be tolerated." He adds: "When it comes to packaging, modern good manufacturing practice is important in retaining all the subtleties that have gone into making it." Al's attention to detail isn't unique, but it is indefatigable.

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