

Winemaker Profile

STEPHEN GEORGE – ASHTON HILLS – ADELAIDE HILLS

Early research with the *Small Winemakers' Tasting Dozen* (SWTD) in mind brought Stephen George's name forward as one of interest. Interest increased after reading of his accredited three winemaking hats in James Halliday's Australian and New Zealand Wine Companion, 1997 Edition. This 'three hat theory' needed further investigation. The Ashton Hills label was obvious, but what were the other two?

It was the 14th of July 1998 about 5.00pm when I pulled up at what appeared to be a deserted Ashton Hills Cellar Door. It now occurs to me, this was *Bastille Day!* Dark, the atmosphere noticeably still and the temperature was extremely chilly. I knocked on the door and a voice responded: "If you're Mark Crombie, you can come in." Until this point, all communication was by telephone.

Cellar Door stage fright, my constant companion nowadays was quickly put to rest. After my initial mumbblings, I at last ventured: How did you end up 'in wine'? "I got into wine at 11 when my frustrated parents sent their energetic, unfocused son to work with a friend of theirs who had a fruit salad block at Waikerie (Riverland S.A.). He grew grapes and loved wine. He'd been a mates of Edwards, Chaffey etc and the McLaren Vale 'Club'," all significant among the crew, aboard *The Pride of the Fleet* in Australian Vinous History.

While Stephen was 16, and interestingly, in our Society's view, still illegal in this Industry, he saved up and sent away for a copy of 'Winkler'. This extraordinary behaviour meant he was ordering a copy of the American Bible on Viticulture. Most other people would use this book, one of significant size as the proverbial doorstop. A fairly dry read!

After school, it was Vintage at the Glenloth Winery near Reynella, south of Adelaide. Then to Roseworthy Agricultural College to begin study on a Diploma in Agriculture. After a year all efforts were transferred to the University of New England at Armidale NSW, and a Degree in Agriculture / Economics. On completion, a surge of common sense expressed itself in a bid for freedom, and two years travelling was the result.

A suitable time for reflection, and a career decision took Stephen back to Roseworthy for the three year Oenology / Winemaking course. Stephen's father, Spencer George, planted Skillogalee in 1970. This was the site of Stephen's early winemaking. All of a sudden a major clue to work with. Most would recognize Skillogalee as a historic Clare Valley Winery, and a significant beginning in a winemaking journey.

Stephen continued making wine at Skillogalee until he left in 1979. Winemaking was in a part time role at Coriole in McLaren Vale until he moved to Ashton in 1981.

Stephen and Peta van Rood established the Ashton Hills Vineyard in 1982, the year prior to the killer Ash Wednesday Fires. A mere seven acres in the Adelaide Hills, it is his most obvious hat. In the Winemaker's words: " Generally, our cool and humid Ashton site produces ideal food wines - they are medium bodied, finely flavoured and have a long cleansing finish."

The portfolio reads: Two Traditionally Bottle Fermented Sparkling Wines: Blanc de Blanc (100% Chardonnay) and Salmon Brut (100% Pinot Noir); Table wines: Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Merlot and a 'varietal' common amongst smaller producers: constant experimentation in all aspects of grape growing and winemaking. This constant itch, literally a suck it and see situation often provides that magic breath from deep within the spirit of these small concerns.

A tight fitting second hat is courtesy of the Galah Label. These are regionally sourced wines. As with all these winemakers, what is in the bottle is what really counts. However modern wine marketing requires many skills. In a wine's presentation we nearly always see a back label. 'Usually' it contains a considered and accurate description of the wine within. To avoid the many related stresses in such a production, the Galah's back label is done away with. It is a statement in favour of enjoyment instead of an almost franchisee requirement. "You don't drink the label!"

The third hat takes on a degree of mystery which is the consultant's role. It is on no lesser site than the highly acclaimed Wendouree Cellars in Clare. In an Australian vigneron and vinification context, this is an ancient site of almost folklore standing. This role commands an enormous responsibility from the makers for their consumers. A performance that begun in 1980 and continues.

It is an amazing array of headgear. Somehow though, there seems to be time enough for the amateur philosopher, by way of observation, and a natural need to understand. A 'pastime' shared, it seems, by small winemakers remotely situated in their creativity. It is an intriguing element in their make-up, and resulting theories often leave you wandering, slightly lost, just like the endings of the original series of The Bill.

"'Gardening' becomes a need and a way to recreate a contact with the earth. Our origins are trying to cope with relocation, particularly to high rise developments. Residing and working above the ground may have been too fast." (S. George 14.7.98)

Rolling down Greenhill Road back into Adelaide, just 30 minutes away, my thoughts were still concerned with Stephen's Pinot trials and the many samples from barrels were still fresh in mind. Also looked at was the initial Shiraz from Burra, a new vineyard venture, with which he was well pleased. With this new deposit of knowledge, the processes again throw up the ever-recurring wonder, which is the true value of the human investment in winemaking. That ever present,.... constant itch with all its challenges.

Hitting the metropolitan limits of this major City, you realise with a jolt, just how close those fires of 1983 were. It is then that Stephen's gardening theory strikes again. Seventeen years earlier they had to defend their infant vineyard from an uncompromising mood of nature. In his own words "getting your hands into the dirt does offer a great deal if you are prepared to think about it."

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