Winemaker Profile

DOUG GROOM - AVALON WINES - KING VALLEY

After a couple of conversations with Doug to establish which wines we could use in the November Dozen, the subject moved onto the "Profile." After sending down a couple of previous ones he said he'd get back to me. A not too early morning phone call sometime later had Doug telling me that he had got out of bed at 3.00am that morning and wrote out the following.

One comment I must make is that I am very impressed, if that's the right word, with the wisdom of his parents in his early days of wine consumption. No matter which way I look at it, he has a fifteen-year advantage over me due mainly to my more conservative, law fearing parents. Doug did as he was told too!

"Keep It Simple Stupid", I guess is my basic philosophy when it comes to wine making and most other things as well. I always remember the old quote that wine in Burgundy made itself because the vigneron was out in the vineyard pruning and so it had to! Well I have one pruner and myself so the same thing happens at Avalon.

I started drinking wine as a three-year-old child and I always loved it. My father at that time (1961 or thereabouts) ran a marine engineering business on Sydney Harbour which involved repairing French ships which traveled between Noumea and Sydney carrying nickel and some passengers. Of course, the crew was French and drank wine and Dad brought the occasional bottle home for us to try, and that's when it started, this long adventure. To cut a long story short I left school in 1975 and went to live in Coonawarra for a year, working my first vintage at Lindemans's Rouge Homme, under the famous John Vickery of Buring's Riesling fame. After vintage I was sent out in the vineyard to prune and eventually ended up at Wynns in their vineyards. Coonawarra at that time was just starting to expand and we were working on a new vineyard site a few miles from Coonawarra. The initial process in vineyards there was to deep rip and pull up a lot of limestone boulders which we had to break up with sledgehammers. Imagine my relief when I got the call to go to Roseworthy College to study Oenology!

Anyway, I left Coonawarra and went to Roseworthy in 1977, studying under some great people including Richard Smart and Bryce Rankine. Some of my classmates included Joe Grilli (Dux of course), Andrew Garrett, Nigel Dolan (just won the Jimmy Watson the other day) Kevin Judd (Cloudy Bay) and Ros Ritchie (Delatite). A great time was had by all and we learnt a little bit as well.

Just an example of how things have changed in the industry, I remember we had a private tasting run over six sessions of 1970 Bordeaux reds (a famous vintage) at the grand price of \$20.00! We were tasting wine of the calibre of Chat. Haut Brion, Chateau Palmer etc. They obviously couldn't give them away at that time! Anyway, in 1979 I did a vintage at Clare (Jim Barry's) and 1980 at Penfolds in the Barossa (before it was corporatised!).

In 1981 my father bought our present land in the King Valley after looking over many parcels of land in the Hunter and Mudgee. We wanted to be secure with regard to water and the King Valley certainly has its fair share of it. We commenced planting that year and luckily planted about 1/3 Chardonnay that was starting to become fashionable, and stood us in good stead over the next 20 years. We sell some of our grapes to other companies i.e. De Bortoli and Domaine Chandon. Chardonnay has always been in demand.

To tide myself over in the first years of development I did four vintages in Griffith, three at Orlando and one at what is now Cranswick Smith. In that vintage I was responsible for red wine production. We were contract processing for Mitchelton at that time. I made 1.25 million litres of red and I worked out it was 1% of the entire Australian crush that year.

In 1984 I went on the big overseas odyssey and did a vintage at Dry Creek Vineyard in Sonoma in California. Here I first saw oxidative handling of whites on a large scale and came to the conclusion that it was the way to go. In 1985 I came back to Australia and found myself working for Wolf Blass in the Barossa, and it was here I learnt a lot about barrel handling (no wood, no good!).

In 1986 we built our winery and crushed our first grapes and the Government introduced the first wine tax! After 20 years in the business my father saw the light and decided to retire to Melbourne (would you believe!) and myself and my wife Rosa bought the business from him and we now "live above the shop", so to speak. We have had a bit of luck with our Shiraz. The 1998 Shiraz won the 2000 Winewise Small Vigneron Award, and subsequent Shiraz have been highly recommended by them which is hard to achieve. The Chardonnay (1999) was also well rated by them. These successes have lifted our profile a little and kept us afloat. Cellar door has become quite buoyant in fact, particularly since more cellars in the valley have opened up full time.

Anyway back to my basic philosophy in winemaking. The wines are made very simply, the whites with oxidated juice and only minimal settling. The Chardonnay is fermented naturally with no added yeast, to gain complexity and mouth feel. It is left on lees and barrel stirred every week or so. The reds are fermented on skins for as long as possible to soften the tannins. The larger ones are precipitated by polymerization, leaving the smaller softer tannins. They are pressed to barrel (mostly Sirugue oak from Rick Kinzbrunner, Giaconda) and left on lees without SO2 until bottling time, when they are racked a few times and bottled without filtration. Simple really!

11-11-2003

The current range of wines, as follows, again confirms the creative edge in small winemaking operations: Merlot 2002, Shiraz 2001, Cabernet Sauvignon 2002, Pinot Noir 2002 and Rosado 2003 (a wonderful warm weather blended wine from Shiraz, Pinot Noir and Tempranillo). In white wines: Chardonnay 2002, Semillon 2000, and finishing with the Pinot Noir Methode Champenoise. "I like anything with Pinot Noir in it", says Doug!