

Winemaker Profile

RON LIEBICH - LIEBICHWEIN - BAROSSA VALLEY

Ron Liebich is one of the “Originals” from the first SWTD of May 1998. Since then there have been six of his table wines in various Dozens, and this is without venturing into his many fortified expressions.

A native fifth generation of the Barossa, and third generation winemaker, Ron’s original ambition was to be a minister of religion. He gained a scholarship to Roseworthy Agricultural to study agriculture in the years 1963-65, following gentle persuasion from his Uncle Darkie. This led to two years of Oenology, as it was in those days, finally graduating in 1968. “What followed was valuable work experience in the vintage of 1967 under John Vickery at Leo Buring, where Ron learnt not only to make tawny port (too light!), BUT how to make good Riesling.”

You begin to see Ron’s career in context a little more with those he studied with. “Noteworthy names in my year were Warren Ward (Brief stint as Penfolds Manager, now at Tinlin), Alan Hoey (Chief Red Winemaker at Yalumba), Colin Campbell (Campbells of Rutherglen), Robert Cartwright, (famous at Leeuwin Estate), Richard Baldwin (Lindemans) and Phil Waldeck (Waldecks, Swan Valley).”

With the studying and work experience now over, and married to Janet, Ron was destined to become the winemaker at the family owned Rovalley wines. Janet was to join the “Liebich Wives” working on the bottling line. Ron’s grandfather, Benno Liebich, established Rovalley in 1919. “It was incredible what I used to do in those days.”

As winemaker, Ron was responsible for the whole range: sparkling wines, vermouth, sweet, medium and dry sherry, marsala, tawny port and a quarter of a million litres a year of Rich Port. Also there was a comprehensive range of table wine, bottle and bulk. Ron also donned the white coat to do all the lab work, and in his spare time kept the books up to date. All pretty demanding stuff on both Ron and Janet, but the winds of change were gathering for everyone.

Life as a Barossa winemaker in those days was different. It was another era. Increased wine consumption brought with it new demands, and as knowledge flowed, most dramatically in the 1980s, winemaking was changing. In this period of transformation, Ron’s winemaking was to go through a re-birth.

Rovalley was sold in 1985, the year Ron started making Liebichwein Port. Cellar Door Sales was established in 1992, where Ron and Janet carry out business as proprietors of Liebichwein. As stated on their labels. Liebichwein is Barossa Deutsch for “I love wine,” and this sentiment underlines in a subtle way the new focus of making significantly less wine, concentrating on premium quality to accommodate the demands of a more informed consumer.

“Ron’s hobby of growing table grapes with flavour was a natural lead into making wine big on grape flavour. Thus Ron is forever seeking innovative ways to improve flavours, from trying different vineyard techniques of soil preparation, with more organic fertilizer and disease control programs, various watering regimes, to prolonging “hang time” of fruit on the vine.”

Gone are the days where winemaking was done to order to suit the market place. Those long days of grind. These days Ron describes his winemaking role as a “pleasure.” Certainly there is the constant worry any small producer suffers of where the next sales are to come from. The ongoing dilemma of any small business!

His ‘pleasure’ is obvious when the subject of wine comes up, whether in the Cellar Door, where he is most relaxed, or when he and Janet visit Sydney, wherever. If you happen to open a fridge and he spots a bottle of wine that may have been opened for weeks awaiting abandonment to the recycling processes, a cup of tea is literally put on hold, until the condition of that wine is analyzed sufficiently. He then drinks his tea.

The wealth of knowledge and experience is most evident though on his own turf, where he talks enthusiastically about what he has made this past vintage or what he made ten years ago. It’s a great adventure and the bonus while listening is that you always get a new perspective on some aspect of winemaking you’re not ready for. Whether it is the wood treatment this year’s Cabernet Sauvignon or something about the complex world of the vineyard, with the unexpected frantic growth in the newly planted Tempranillo variety. Robert Crabtree planted Tempranillo at the same time and he said they grew like Triffids.

Winery, home and vineyard are 80 acres that survived the sale of Rovalley. Sixty acres are planted to: Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Petit Verdot, Mataro, Grenache, Semillon, Tempranillo and Muscat. The operation is family owned and operated, with Ron very much hands on both in the vineyard and winery.

“The Liebich range of dry and sweet table whites, dry reds and fortifieds including tawny and vintage port, is a reflection of Ron’s traditional past, thus the term “quintessential Barossa” can be used to describe Ron, his winery and the wines.”

Grape crushing is contracted to another small winery, where fermentation and eventual basket pressing is carried out by Ron. The wine is then matured at Liebichwein and finally blended prior to bottling. All bottled wine is from fruit grown on the property, which is situated on the eastern slopes of the Valley at Rowland Flat, in heavy red and brown earth and biscay soils.

You always feel welcome visiting the ministry of the Liebich Cellar Door. Soon you’re comfortably talking about wine and other things, and aspects of this family business shine through.

While I was organizing some details for this Profile I received an E-mail from Janet to complete the picture which summed up nicely the “something” about small wineries. “Thanks for tackling it and doing all the hard work. (We should have added Ron has an aversion to any paper work, but I might add, not newspaper reading.) Janet.”

24-2-2004