

Winemaker Profile

IAN MacRAE – MIRAMAR - MUDGEES

The first I remember hearing of Ian MacRae and Miramar Wines was in the 1982 Robin Bradley book "The Small Wineries of Australia." And it would have been at the time of Publication. Statistically Miramar occupies the middle to upper-middle ground of the Smaller Wineries regime, but it is at the very heart of its ideology.

Ian was born at Berri in the Riverland in South Australia. ".....and some of the early winemakers such as Alec Kelly, Doug Collett (father of Scott, of Woodstock in the McLaren Vale), Karl Weidenhofer and Brian Barry were family friends." All high quality influences, and maybe there was no way out of winemaking as a career. (*)

"My father, a pharmacist had recently discovered wine, toward the end of an era when if you drank wine you were either a snob or a plonky." Australia was still a country decked out in shorts and long socks, and the fruits of wisdom, plus the ability to overcome many insecurities were all still in the earning.

"I was good at Chemistry, and would have been an Engineer if my Maths were better. I went to Roseworthy in 1958, did the required two years of the Agriculture Course, and then completed the Diploma in Oenology with Honours in 1962. There were six in my year including Phil Laffer, Ian MacKenzie and Colin Kay. (**)

I did a couple of vintages while still a student at Penfolds, under the famous Ray Beckworth, and also with Hardys both at Siegersdorf and Mile End. After graduation I joined the Loxton Co-Op where I was involved in bulk winemaking and distillation.

I then moved to Kaiser Stuhl while it was still "Nurivin" just as Ian Hickenbotham was creating a new image for Barossa Valley wines. I was assistant to a young German winemaker called Wolf Blass and when he left a few years later to make wine for Tolleys, I took over his position as sparkling winemaker and was responsible for thousands of cases of Sparkling Rhinegold and Gala Spumante. I became responsible for engineering at Kaiser Stuhl and designed most of the modern plant which converted a 1930s tin shed into an up to date 15,000 Tonne Winery."

Ian also designed the open-air winery for Hungerford Hill at Buronga, a new concept at the time. Also the first stage of a new comprehensive complex for what is now Krondorf. "A new vintage cellar for J.Y. Tulloch in the Hunter was yet another venture. I was to spend a lot of time in the Hunter in the early 1970s, after forming my own consultancy company, WAID. I was involved in the design of most of the crop of new wineries that sprung up at the time. Hungerford Hill again, McPhersons, Saxonvale, Hermitage among others.

Just before vintage in 1975 I was asked to come to Mudgee to commission and manage the (I thought) just completed Montrose winery owned by the Italian born partners of the giant engineering company, Transfield.

I completed two vintages at Montrose and during this time had plenty of opportunity to taste local wines and assess the area's potential. I was impressed with both. At that time Craigmore, one of the oldest wineries in Australia, had just begun to produce some of the country's first Chardonnay, and some of these early examples were very impressive, as were their Semillon-Chardonnay blends. Bob Roberts of Huntington Estate had been in business since 1973, and I think it was when I tasted his 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon that I decided that Mudgee had all the characteristics to be a great wine area." He stayed.

Miramar's first wine, made in 1977, was a result of a Co-venture with a Sydney architect. Ian has long since bought his partner out, increased his planting to 85 acres, and over the years has been very successful in wine shows. (38 Trophies, 83 Gold Medals, 160 Silver Medals and 305 Bronze Medals in Australia and recently overseas).

Mudgee, the second town settled over the Blue Mountains, is located in the rolling hills of the Central Tablelands in NSW, a 3 to 4 hours drive from Sydney. Compared to the 'nearby' Hunter, growing conditions are much cooler. Typically very cool nights and clear skies ensure high sunlight hours with low degree days, good for ripening fruit. Vintage is usually six weeks after the Hunter.

An interesting statistic in a perspective sense, Mudgee (in 1995) crushed about 2000 tonnes of grapes, about the same as a single middle sized Hunter winery. Today it is significantly more due to the frenzied planting of the late 1990s. Even this has a quality point in another perspective. Mudgee now has a greatly enhanced reputation as region of quality, even if overdue in real terms. Not ones to take risks, huge plantings by the "Big Boys" confirm this.

The Society for the Appellation of the Wines of Mudgee demonstrates in a practical way Ian's firm belief in Regional Styles. "The Mudgee area is noted for full flavoured wines, both white and red, and have good colour and good varietal characteristics. They are usually long lived and have good fruit and acid. As a class they are quite recognisable."

Wine styles from Miramar are Chardonnay, Semillon, Riesling, Eurundere Rose, Fume Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, a Sauternes style botrytis Riesling called Doux Blanc, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon.

(*)Alec Kelly: Chief Winemaker Berri Co-OP., later MD at Loxton and God Father of Ian.

Doug Collett: Technical Manager at Berri Co-Operative for 17 years.

Karl Weidenhofer: Managing Director of Renmano Co-Operative.

Brian Barry: Winemaker at Berri Co-Operative Winery and major Wine Show Judge.

(Above: These were the positions held at the decision stage of Ian's future Career.)

(Below: Current whereabouts of contemporaries.)

(**)Ian MacKenzie: Chief Winemaker Sparkling and White Wines, Southcorp (Ret.).

Phil Laffer: Viticulture & Winemaking Director & Chief Winemaker Orlando Wyndham Group.

Colin Kay: Chief Executive / Winemaker for Kay's Amery South Australia. 5/02/2002.