

# Winemaker Profile

## MURRAY SMITH – ORANGE DISTRICT

Don Perry, a respected Wine Industry Elder, remembers Murray attending strategic wine tastings at his establishment, John Haldon & Co in The Rocks, in the late 1970s. They were reasonably serious occasions, as they actively competed with the now defunct Wine and Spirit Buying Guide, to publish their results first.

Amongst the regular crowd at these tastings, which included the likes of Nick Bullied and Peter Bourne, Don remembers, and in his words, a “quiet”, “shy” Murray Smith. I have since informed Don that this mode of ‘Murray behaviour’ still occurs if the situation arises, that requires him to flick on the focus switch. Peripheral distractions are ignored, as he consumes totally the subject at hand.

Murray completed a Degree in Marine Biology at James Cook University before being lured and seduced by wine. This vinous attraction took him from The Rocks to Roseworthy Agricultural College, and a career in winemaking. From Roseworthy days it was an odyssey of vintages in Australia, New Zealand, France and California before finally settling with family, in the volcanic red soil at around 800m in Orange, in 1986.

Ten years later, during wine Australia in 1996, was my first experience with the unique Canobolas-Smith label. Always curious with the statement it presents to the world, I finally asked Murray, two years later, what inspired the wrap around blue seal of pedigree. His reply was simply: “We’re new and we can put any sort of label on the wine we want.” It was in the very early days of vintage 1998 when I made this inquiry, and it was obvious he’d heard the question before. There is no doubt however, the scene it depicts. On cool, clear nights in Orange, you can’t help being struck wow, by the starry sky above Mount Canobolas.

Each vintage since then there have been other Murray quotes that I’m sure reflect the thoughts, concerns and findings of grape growing winemakers across the country. These thoughts, are a pre-requisite condition, for any farmer to know how to get the best out of their bit of land, in the most caring way possible.

Another time and out of the blue came: “I think it takes about ten years before you know what you can do with your vineyard.” Ten years of pruning, training vines, working out when to pick which variety for whatever reason. Learning the personalities of various parts of the vineyard, and what seasonal variations can do, all before the winemaking confounds the simplicity of such a statement.

Meeting and getting to know winemakers is fun and usually results in compulsive listening once they get on a role. They’re full of Industry information via their own interpretation, and of course there is the gossip. Mostly it is enjoyed for the moment, but some of Murray’s old Roseworthy classmate’s reveal some good stuff. On a slightly serious note, Kevin McCarthy (T’Gallant) and Steve Webber (De Bortoli

Wines), both high profile winemakers in Victoria, regard Murray's career as special, and should be watched.

The "out there" winemaker, capable of, and bound to do good things. Kevin once told me, Murray had the best palate in their group. A different era exists now, but this is just about the best compliment a winemaker is capable of. When it comes to viticulture, again, they rate the application of his skills highly. They're all friends, and given the opportunity, they will deny such high praise, but my big ears were not mistaken.

I've worked at Canobolas-Smith for part of the last five vintages, and I have seen lots of things I'd like to include, if only the amusing ones. And there are many more quotes. But there is something much more important at work there that is worth mentioning. Orange is a burgeoning wine region of proven quality, and given the right situation, you will always hear Murray promoting it for the benefit of all concerned.

It gets back to the proven formula that a successful region is all about people, going about their business, developing their craft. The interested wine consumer wants to understand what a winemaker is trying to achieve, and there is no better way than being able to talk to the source. Regions need characters, and Murray is his own emphatic type. The D'Aquino family is a long established family in Orange, and has had all sorts of interests in the Liquor Industry, over many years. The business head of the family, Rex D'Aquino once told me: "Murray Smith is our region's folk hero, we need him."

Vintage 2002 is slowing down, and Canobolas-Smith's 15 acres of dry grown vines have produced good, healthy fruit, which is a welcome change to two difficult years immediately prior.

A Food Week vertical tasting of six vintages of Chardonnay, in two flights, saw the results of 1996, 1997 and 1998 and 1999, 2000 and 2001. The 2000 was a most difficult vintage, with lingering memories of hours spent at the press cutting out diseased fruit from the grape bunches. Alan Smith, Murray's father, thought the task was "like trying to pick fly shit out of pepper!" Constant rain at the wrong time worked against quality. And when you are an independent small maker with a finite grape resource, you simply cannot blend away weaknesses, as is the option of large-scale, multi sourcing operations.

The finished wine is stunning, considering its origins. It is not a great wine, but it deserves due consideration, and as Peter Bourne said at the tasting: "You've got nothing to be ashamed of in that wine Murray."

The cliché: "a good winemaker can make acceptable wine in difficult years", certainly applies here. What was it I heard Murray mumble the other day? "I'd have to do something really silly, to not make good wine this year."

This Profile was always going to be a collection of quotes!

Bring on the Vintages.....in their own time!

20/5/02.