

Winemaker Profile

ALASDAIR SUTHERLAND – CAPERCAILLIE – HUNTER VALLEY

“Capercaillie was born of an article in ‘The Scottish Field Magazine’ that captured the majesty, aura and rarity of Scotland’s ‘old man of the woods’, the black woodlands grouse.” James Halliday’s *Wine Companion*, John Beeston’s *The Wine Regions of Australia* and *Discover Australia Wineries*, Edited by Peter Forrestal and written by everybody else, all describe Alasdair respectively as a “veteran Hunter winemaker.” Uncommon unanimity in such a highly subjective world and best summed up by Beeston’s comment: “There are no poor wines at Capercaillie.”

Among Alasdair’s early life memories are: “of Gifford in East Lothian, a small house on the Haddington side of the church; and riddling potatoes, collecting rosehips and fresh gooseberries. And boarding school at Loretto in Musselburgh, with its splendid chapel, cold tubs every morning, rugby in the snow and kilts on Sundays.” Memories firmly established in Scotland.

“November 1966 saw the family leaving for the warmer climes and wide open spaces of Australia. Iain, Alasdair’s father, had accepted a position in a small medical practice in Wingham, in those days approximately a six-hour drive north of Sydney. Two years in Primary School in Wingham and six more, again as a boarder, at The Scots College in Sydney”, had Alasdair ready to manage his fate.

Soon Alasdair was ‘flatting’ in Sydney. Sharing was Morag, the fiancé of a Haddington family friend, Ian Hastie. At the time “a position for a cadet winemaker presented itself with Arrowfield Wines, where Ian was Vineyard Manager.”

“Alasdair commenced with Arrowfield during the 1975 harvest and over the next three and half years his energies were directed towards studying Wine Science by correspondence, playing both rugby codes for the local town of Musswellbrook and courting Trish. Alasdair had met Trish while he was playing the part of Ruth in a Scots College production of the Pirates of Penzance. Trish became his personal make up artist and the relationship blossomed.”

1978 brought with it the opportunity for Alasdair to take a position as Assistant Winemaker with Saxonvale Wines. “Saxonvale Wines, a medium sized operation of about 1000 tonnes per annum, was like Arrowfield, one of the new boys on the block within the Hunter’s booming wine industry. Within two years of joining the crew, Alasdair’s superior resigned and the position of Senior Winemaker became available. Believing in his capabilities the owners, the Macdougall brothers, were happy for Alasdair to step into the breach and so began a ten year stretch that cemented his reputation within both the local and national industry.”

“Trish qualified in Hotel and Catering Management, and was working for one of the Valley’s local restaurants and doing a bit of catering on the side.” As well, there was the raising their two boys. This ‘extra bow’, on the food side of the partnership was to add to the Sutherland’s journey, even adding a touch of irony.

“There were some memorable vintages during the 80’s, which produced wines that are still drinking beautifully today. But in 1988, a horrible wet one, the feet got itchy and decisions were made to seek the sub-tropical climate, ambiance and maritime activities offered by the village of Yamba on the far north coast of NSW. For the next three years Alasdair and Trish owned and operated Pippi’s Restaurant which offered the locals and visitors alike, fine food and one of the best winelists for hundreds of kilometres.”

“With Trish in the kitchen and Alasdair doing his best ‘Basil Fawlty’ impersonations in front of house, they built a great little business until a couple of hurdles beyond their control, were put in front of them. In the early 90s, the recession that apparently Australia ‘had to have’ and a couple of seasons of severe drought sadly made their earlier endeavours somewhat worthless.”

There was a time when another Scottish born ‘expatriate’ made a successful return to his “Hunter” days. The Sutherlands never said never to their ‘goldfinger’, and it was to the vintages of 1994 and ’95 at Calais Estate, all the while on the lookout for their own plot.

“In 1975 as Alasdair was entering the industry, the Dawson family was planting a small vineyard in Lovedale on the eastern edge of the lower Hunter Valley region. In September 1995 Alasdair and Trish exchanged contracts with the Dawsons and became the owners of a 60 acre property”, which included 17 acres of mature vineyard.

“Selecting parcels of fruit ‘from all the right regions for all the right reasons’ they have hand-crafted a portfolio of 12 wines chosen from Semillon, Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, Shiraz and the red hybrid Chambourcin from their own and other vineyards in warmer Hunter Valley regions. From the higher altitudes and colder climates of the Orange region west of Sydney, they have contracted vineyards growing varieties Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon, and from the South Australian regions of the Clare Valley, Barossa Valley. McLaren Vale, Langhorne Creek and Coonawarra parcels of Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Riesling and Petit Verdot grapes complete the mix.”

In recent times there have been small orders exported to Singapore, Indonesia, Ireland and New Zealand. Their main export destination is to Scotland via Wine Importers Edinburgh Ltd. A circle of sorts is completes itself here, as the proprietors are none other than Ian and Morag Hastie, who returned to Scotland in the early 1980s.

“For more information about Capercaillie’s range of wines you can access tasting notes on our website www.capercailliewine.com.au Capercaillie can also deliver wine to your door almost anywhere in the world.”

31/01/2003