

Winemaker Profile

TIM KIRK – CLONAKILLA – CANBERRA DISTRICT

Canberra the city can create some emotion in any of us. Canberra the wine region has always been interesting. My first visit was in late 1984. As part of a group we visited Helms, Jeir Creek and Clonakilla. During 1984, as a student, I had many visits to wineries, but they were all large corporates, or at least medium sized concerns. These small operations really made an impression. One of the books doing the rounds at the time was Robin Bradley's: The Small Wineries of Australia, first published in 1982 and completely revised and updated in 1986.

Recently, I pulled both books out to see who they featured in the Canberra Region. Flicking through, there was nothing to be found, but there was an entry for Robinsons Family Vineyard in Ballandean, Queensland, as well as one for Chateau Hornsby in the Alice. My curiosity in regionality birthing was being re-visited.

In about 1986, I asked my then employer why he didn't stock any wines from Canberra. His response was a simple blank look. Always my first thoughts about a new region included its people and what they were doing. Canberra was and is a unique story, but it still needed its icons, or boldly speaking, 'winemaking stars' to get noticed, or so it seems to me.

Clonakilla was established in 1971 by Dr. John Kirk a former CSIRO scientist. Checking out a few more books today, in 2001 a few more observations adds to the picture. The 'Australia and New Zealand Complete Book of Wine' by Len Evans, Copyright 1973, has no mention of Canberra at all, but Rooty Hill's fading 'Minchinbury Vineyard' is well detailed. The revised (Australian only) Edition of 1984 mentions the Middleton Wine Company P/L of Murrumbateman. At last! It wasn't until I discovered the "Secret Wines of NSW" by Barry Penfold; Copyright 1989 that I was able to find any detail about this vineyard planted 18 years earlier. Here it claims Clonakilla as the first commercial vineyard in this born again region. John Beeston's "A Concise History of Australian Wine" (2nd Edition, Revised and Updated 1995) has no mention of either Clonakilla or the Kirks that I can find, not even in the Index. For a number of years now, the Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier has been one of the most difficult wines in Australia to get your hands on.

Tim Kirk is now the winemaker at Clonakilla and does have a well-deserved reputation. He does represent the second generation of winemaking on this site, and he has been innovative in taking proceedings to the next level. Maybe that was the trick.

"My father John Kirk established Clonakilla in 1971. As a child I used to come out to the farm on weekends with one or two of my five brothers to give dad a hand. In fact we spent most of the time chasing lambs or building cubbies and generally having a good time. As children we were always offered wine at the dinner table, it was a normal part of our family culture, but my real interest in wine began in the late eighties when as a young adult I began to drink wine with friends. An interest developed into a passion and soon I was collecting wine, attending tastings and reading everything I could get my hands on to deepen my knowledge.

I worked as a Schoolteacher in Melbourne through the early nineties, and happily the Easter holidays tended to coincide with vintage. I was free then to be up to my armpits in grapes, learning the elements of good winemaking from dad with plenty of practical experience to back up the theory. My wife Lara and I moved up to Murrumbateman with our young family at the end of 1996 in order to take up winemaking at Clonakilla full-time. We have also purchased the adjoining property and planted our own vineyard to Shiraz and Viognier, as well as a small olive grove on the warm north-east facing site.

I traveled to France in 1991 and there visited Marcel Guigal, one of the world's great winemakers, situated in the Northern Rhone valley. It was there that I was able to try Guigal's famous single vineyard Cote Roties from barrel - blends of Shiraz and Viognier. Quite simply these were the greatest young wines I have ever tasted. My father had planted some Viognier at Clonakilla in the mid eighties, so from 1992 onwards we began incorporating a small amount of Viognier into our Shiraz. This wine, the Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier, has become something of a star for us, with many gold medals, trophies and five star reviews to its credit.

We have recently started making a straight Viognier, which has attracted a fair amount of attention. (Look out for the SBS Wine Lovers show on October 2.) We have also released a second Shiraz, this time from grapes we buy in from the Hilltops district of New South Wales. It is made with the same winemaking philosophy as the Shiraz Viognier, but at less than half the price!

My life now as the winemaker and general manager at Clonakilla is something of a dream come true. We have a wonderful rural lifestyle with plenty of room for our four children to grow. Our wines are much in demand, which makes my job all the more satisfying. We make a range of wines, all of which have their own personalities. I enjoy making and drinking them all. I can't think of a better job!

Tim Kirk "

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