

Winemaker Profile

DR. JOHN WILSON – WILSON VINEYARD – POLISH HILL RIVER

Where do you start with this man's personality? If he has an opinion on something, and he usually does, it has been developed by reason over time, no doubt among the vines, or sheds, or even tinkering with the various trains memorabilia at his Polish Hill retreat. He'll tell you what he thinks of you and your ideas, which I find acceptable and comprehensively instructive. There is no time for ego stroking with John, there's too much to do, too much happening.

"It all started with an increasing interest in wine in the early 1970s, a few dollars to spend, and a yearning to get out into the country. Clare produced some good wines, the country was some of the most attractive to be found, and it was not too far out of the city. These were broad criteria for selecting the region for our wines. In 1973 John Wilson set out with soil map and sampling auger in search for the plot for his vines.

The local agent was most helpful, with lots of lovely vineyard plots for sale around Clare, and not too concerned by my request to dig holes in them all. The first block was surely one of the best in Clare - well the top inch or two may have been, but to sample any deeper would have required a stick of gelignite! We looked at one block, then another, reporting back to the land agent on our soil findings.

Whether or not it was our continually negative soil reports, maybe we had him bluffed by science, or perhaps it was the dismally wet day that had the agent despairing of ever making a sale, whereupon he bundled us into his car to see a block that wasn't even on the market. It was the spring of 1973; the day was far too wet to even get out of the car.

A week later the day was perfect, and ideal for a soil-sampling excursion; this time the soil profiles came out something like what the book said they should. The long-suffering land agent finally got to close the sale. That first purchase was 66 acres; in 1979 we purchased the adjoining section of 83 acres.

The chosen land was some of the grazing slopes east of Sevenhill. The locals were bemused by this venture and were firm but kind with their advice about the unsuitability of the area for grapes. To that same handful of locals the little valley was known as Polish Hill River, a quaint tribute to its early pioneers.

In 1980 the vineyard produced its first commercial wine and with that Shiraz Cabernet, wine consumers were introduced to this hitherto unknown corner of Clare. By then no one had any doubts about the ability of Polish Hill River to produce fine wine. The Wilson family has been content to expand its operation slowly and steadily and is unfussed that most who followed them now cultivate larger tracts.

Viewed in retrospect, our decision to venture into wine in the early 1970s was a correct move, even though the reasons behind the decision were quite wrong. If I was going to give myself advice about doing the same venture in 2002, the advice would be – DON'T!

In the early 1970s it was clear that the medical system was feeling the thin end of the wedge as far as officialdom burdening the system with its regulation. Thirty years on, the wedge has gone the full way. Meanwhile the same disease has taken hold of the wine biz, which too has become bogged down with regulations, paper work, and the inevitable do-gooders who tell us that it is all for the collective good of the industry. (Along with the do-gooders are the “nid-nodders” who blindly follow the do-gooders).

We did our thing in the Clare Valley. I suspect that history will record the Clare Valley as a fool’s “paradise.” When we opened our cellar door in 1980, there were already about 12 others. Now there are about 40, which is a number that on some days exceeds the number of tourists who spread themselves through the valley. All those others, like ourselves, are in the Clare because we love the place and it produces great wine. Clare, being that little further out from Adelaide, has always languished by comparison to the other wine regions, by way of visitor numbers. There are now too many other cellar door operations. This means we have to concentrate on eastern states markets to be viable, which means that the harder market pushes us to make better wines. The danger is that as the smaller independents disappear from the retail sector, quality alone may be insufficient for the survival of the Clare industry as it is presently structured.

With each vintage we strive to make the perfect wine. It is an impossible dream, because it assumes that the perfect wine will be appraised by the perfect wine judge.

Wilson the Younger (Daniel) has just completed his Wine Science course at Charles Sturt University, and has appointed himself a full-time position in the business next year. All the lessons in life were plotted for us in the mythology of the ancient Greeks, and we recall that they had it worked out that ‘the son shall always usurp the father’.

Throughout the 1990s John would come to Sydney, usually about August, to visit outlets carrying his wine. It was always a pleasure to see him and get the latest on what he was up to wine wise and anything else that had ‘mischiefed’ him of late. After one memorable tasting he did at a high profile Advertising agency in North Sydney in the early 1990s, a hardened company man, who has since retired came up to me and said: “It’s so refreshing to see someone who is not full of bullshit!”

Not that I would ever feel uncomfortable with it, not at all, I’m sure! One of John’s “Notable Quotes” does however return to my thoughts – on occasion. “People often ask if it requires great skills to make wine. I reply that any fool can make wine. The hard part is selling it – it requires a special sort of fool to sell wine!”

A lot of this information was gathered from the extensive www.wilsonvineyard.com.au and from extra aphorisms kindly supplied by John for the purpose of this Winemaker Profile. I had to look “aphorisms” up, naturally! For what still mystifies John and many of his fellow winemakers, go to the Web Page, then to Newsletters, Classic Clippings then “End of Vintage, No 21,” and read about “**WHY DO GLOOPS.**”

20/11/2002