

Winemaker Profile

MICK WITHERS – YASS VALLEY WINES – CANBERRA DISTRICT

It was probably while grazing through the various books sometime during the mid 1990s that I first came across Yass Valley Wines. I hadn't a clue that it was located in Murrumbateman, in the Canberra District. The only recollection from then is that it had recently seen new owners, and that the rundown vineyard was undergoing a rescue mission. "People at it," is what I find so interesting. It stuck in my mind, and checking the notes, toward the end of 1998 I purchased petrol in the local licensed grocery where I saw a bottle of Yass Valley Riesling 1996. It was the first of Mick's wines in the Dozens. (February 1999).

The first visit to a winery always provides a surprise and often rewards the anticipation. The Cellar Door area was compact and welcoming, and I was struck by the number of bottles offered for tasting from this small winery. But that wasn't the only thing. Almost every winery, where books are on display, I've noticed consistently, that "Making Good Wine" by Bryce Rankine is almost always present, which says so much for that particular publication. Here at Yass Valley Wines, the book collection was hard core chemistry.

It was early in the first conversation and curiosity won out, as I wondered what the story was in those specialised books. "They're from another life," or something similar, was Mick's response. He is a Chemist and lectured in the subject for something like three decades at New South Wales University. Small winemakers are full of surprises!

"Mick Withers and Anne Hillier purchased the property in 1991. The previous owners had planted a small vineyard but it was seriously neglected and required considerable work to bring it back into production. This was done and further plantings of other varieties were made. The most recent additions were in 1999 when the areas devoted to Riesling and Merlot were increased and a small block of Verdelho put in. The 3 hectares of vines now includes Traminer, Chardonnay, Riesling, Semillon, Barbera, Shiraz, Merlot and Verdelho.

One of the newest boutique wineries in the Canberra Region is Yass Valley Wines. Located at the end of a winding country lane, it is an example of the dedication which local wineries give to their art. Before coming to the Canberra District more than 10 years ago, Mick Withers had thought for many years that the district should be a great climatic area for producing fine wine. He is thrilled to find his hunch correct. Some years the weather can be very cruel with disastrous spring frosts, or summer hail storms, but the flavoursome, aromatic wines are worth the challenges".

It was also revealed at this first meeting, Mick has a great deal of enthusiasm for the Italian variety of Barbera. Italian excitement takes a leap into viticulture and wine style in this New World winery in southern NSW, at the same time reflecting the free hand spontaneity of small winery creativity.

Certainly its early days in Australia for a number of “new” varieties and it will be for some time to come, but with people like Mick and Anne doing their thing, they are adding to the momentum.

“Mick believes that good wine is made in the vineyard, and he achieves this with the combination of climate and personal care of the vineyard. Anne Hillier, the viticulturist, doubles as chief taster. They believe in a sparing use of oak, therefore none of their whites are oaked, and the reds, being lightly oaked, are more fruit-driven.

Generally, Mick does not enter many wine shows because he makes small quantities. He tries to make wines for people rather than judges. But he has been successful, although he always wants to make something better than he did before. He has won medals for his Riesling, Semillon, Chardonnay, Shiraz, Merlot, Barbera and Cabernet”.

Wine Shows are a touchy subject with most winemakers, wherever they operate, but they do provide information and it depends how you look at it. Some refer to them as “dedicated followers of fashion”, which would be hard to argue against in the case of the big ones. The Barbera 2001 won a silver medal in the Murrumbateman Cool Climate Wine Show, but nothing anywhere else. I’m not sure who would want to sort all the worms jumping out of the proverbial can, but there is a point in all this. The local show is very competitive. Maybe the palates in judgment possess an extension in wisdom.

“Both of us have studied at Charles Sturt University (Wagga) where I did the wine science course and Anne took a graduate diploma in Viticulture. There is a small winery moderately well equipped and a well-equipped laboratory which can offer consulting services to industry when required.

A new building has just been completed which combines a greatly enlarged cellar door and a small cafe operating only on the weekends”.

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