

Function Report - Bendigo Study Tour

24th March 2002

It was great to see everyone on time to commence the Wine Service Guild's first day tour for 2002. Once all the pick-ups had been completed, a nicely chilled fruit juice was enjoyed, especially by one guest from the southern areas who had no breakfast but had grabbed a bunch of grapes as she raced out the door to meet her chauffeur.

Our first stop was at Dominion Estates vineyard at Mount Aitken (South Gisborne) for our traditional "starter" of fresh bread rolls and coffee. On this occasion we had fillings of various dips, cheese or salami.

The setting for our stop was beautiful. Even though the highway broke the view, the bluestone building nestled amongst some gum trees and a garden of agapanthus was truly stunning.

After our first repast, we were welcomed to the tasting room by Terry and Elaine Lucas who provided a tasting of some of their wines.

The restaurant and tasting room at Mount Aitken is quite new. The vineyard was purchased two years ago and a rebuild of the building was completed in April 2001. The project demonstrates the care and attention taken by the people who designed and completed the refurbishment.

Mt. Aitken is set on about 38 acres, and does not have many vines planted yet. At this time the vines do not look particularly attractive. As with many Victorian vineyards, the weather this season has been abominable for viticulture.

I understand that the wines we tasted were from the Dominion Estates winery at Avenel. The Guild is to visit this winery on its next tour in May.

We tasted a range of reds and whites from the Alexander Park label. The Alexander Park red and white wines retail at about \$19.50, and fortifieds from \$12.50 to \$16.00 per bottle. A more comprehensive report on their wines will be given after the next tour. Suffice to say the wines were great, and we recommend that you take a trip up the Calder Highway for Sunday lunch at Mt. Aitken. However, you had better make sure you have booked in, as it is a very popular venue.

After we left Mt. Aitken Barbara Cecchi organised a game of bingo while we nibbled on small packets of chips and baby kangaroos made from potatoes, in a potato chip style.

It was then decision time as we were asked to make a choice of our luncheon meal. The menu consisted of:

- § Antipasto;
- § Warm Cajun Chicken Salad; or
- § Seafood Platter

This was an innovation for the Guild and should save time when we get to the lunch stop.

At about 11.30 we arrived at Harcourt Valley Vineyards, to be greeted by our hostess Barbara Livingstone.

Harcourt Valley Vineyards was established in 1976 on the Calder Hwy at Harcourt. The vineyard has 10 acres under vines, and is completely family-owned and operated. The product range includes Chardonnay, Riesling, Malbec, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon.

The current owners, John and Barbara Livingston have owned the property for about 13 years. They are largely self-taught. All wine produced is sourced from the vineyard, and all wine sold here is grown, made and bottled on site.

Barbara advised us that they expect their production this year will be about half their normal tonnage.

The vines were struck by wind when they came into flower, and there have been insufficient warm days for the flowers to germinate (I think the equation runs something like the following - no heat; no bees; \no germination).

After an interesting presentation from Barbara Livingstone on the history of the vineyard, and how they go about producing their wine, we partook of an alfresco tasting in a lovely garden setting.

The Riesling was pale in colour, and was very crisp and beautiful to drink.

Someone said that “Barbara’s Shiraz” was named after a person who was full bodied and had a big nose. I can safely say that the wine was not named after any person present (or even known to this correspondent).

We tasted the 2000 Barbara’s Shiraz and followed on with the 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon.

I think that both the red wines will improve with laying down for a few years – certainly they are excellent wines.

Tasting wines at Harcourt Valley is a lovely informal experience. There are signs on the property to the effect that “if you don’t see anyone in the tasting room, give a loud shout and someone will appear to serve you”. We can recommend you visit this winery.

After the interlude at Harcourt Valley, we proceeded to Big Hill Vineyard (BHV). This is a fairly new establishment and is set in beautiful gardens near Bendigo

BHV have an interesting range of wines under the BHV label (\$11 to \$18 per bottle) and the Bendigo label (\$25 per bottle). They also produce a Muscat, a Port, and a Botrytis.

The Granite White was a blend of Traminer and Semillon grapes, and the Granite Red was a very nice light red wine.

The wines complemented our lunch. Unfortunately, the high hopes engendered by pre-ordering our lunches were not fulfilled in the serving of our orders. It appears that the manager with whom all arrangements had been made had left the vineyard, and there was some confusion between what had been decided with himself and our President.

After some confusion, all were served with their lunch – the food was most enjoyable and was complemented by the wines served. The setting is great, and the wines are enjoyable. It will be interesting to return to this venue in a couple of years as I am sure that the teething problems we experienced will be overcome by then.

And so on to Balgownie Estate.

In 1880 there were about 100 wineries in the Bendigo area. However an outbreak of phylloxera in 1893, coupled with the bank crash and the move to fortified wines played their part in the cessation of winemaking in the region until Stuart Anderson (a Bendigo pharmacist) planted vines at Balgownie in 1969, (see James Halliday Interactive Wine Companion).

The tour was split in half here and while one group had a tasting, the other had a tour of the winery.

Balgownie Estate was very different to the other wineries visited today. The estate has had a considerable capital investment made (about \$20 million). Even though modern winemaking methods are employed, we were shown an open fermentation vat.

Again we were advised that grape production is severely depleted compared to other years.

There are about 81 acres under vine here. Wines produced here include
§ Chardonnay;
§ Pinot Noir;

§ Shiraz; and
§ Cabernet Sauvignon.

The new cellar and tasting area was opened in August 2001, and incorporates a wine museum.

It is certainly worth visiting Balgownie Estate to taste their wines, make some purchases and visit the Wine Museum.

The coach was quiet as we travelled back towards Melbourne; many participants taking the opportunity to catch up on some lost sleep time.

At Kyneton we had an afternoon tea stop where we once more had some delicacies prepared by Barbara Cecchi.

As we gently nibbled on Crackers, Dips, Pâtés and Terrines, we reflected on the state of the nation, the forthcoming football season (who cares?) and the thought that we would shortly be returning to our homes and the normal experiences of living – washing dishes, earning an honest quid etc.

All in all, the forty members and guests who took the trip had a marvellous day. Once again, the organisation by our President, Bob Bailey, assisted by Vice President (Administration) Andrew Porteous, was first class. Barbara Cecchi provided us with delightful morning and afternoon teas, and the transport from Pakenham Coaches was to the usual efficient comfort and standard.

Many thanks are extended to:

© Elaine and Terry Lucas of Dominion Estates at Mount Aitken;

© Barbara and John Livingstone of Harcourt Valley Vineyards;

© The staff at Big Hill Vineyard; and

© The staff at Balgownie Estates

For making the tastings so pleasant and informative.

Our next function is a Restaurant Night at Manju Restaurant, 135 – 137 Maling Rd., Canterbury where wines from Trentham Estates will be featured. As bookings are strictly limited, you had better book early to secure your attendance.