

Function Report - Coonawarra Region Study Tour

8th, 9th and 10th March 2003

Coonawarra Educational Tour and Tasting

07.05 in the morning, all sitting in the coach travelling along the Calder highway and the wipers are working removing rainwater from the windscreen. Some of us were wondering from whence came the wetness, but it was actually rain – a rare sight for quite some time. However, those of us who had participated in the tours to Griffiths and Swan Hill in 2001 had a similar experience. Perhaps the best drought breaker may be a Wine Service Guild overnight tour. Some Guild members were awakened at 4.00 am to the sound of rain, thunder and lightning – but not the polka written by one of the Strauss family.

The Guild was on its way to visit the Coonawarra Wine Region for the first time for sixteen years. Of the 43 participants in this tour, only Bob and Helen Bailey, Grace and Ralph Rago and Jenny and Geoff Dennehy had been on the previous tour.

It was pleasant travelling in a new second-hand coach from Pakenham Bus Line. The seats were more comfortable, the windows allowed a better view, and a video recorder was available to while away the hours (on the return journey).

We stopped for the traditional tea, coffee, pâté and rolls at Ballarat, and then travelled on to Coleraine for lunch at the hotel. We arrived at Coonawarra earlier than expected, so we spent some time at Penola visiting the tourist shops etc. It was a pleasant interlude after spending such a long time in the bus.

It was interesting to see the vast array of vineyards as we travelled between Penola and Coonawarra. The names of the vineyards was a veritable who's who of Australian Winemakers – Redman's, Wynns, Yalumba, Jacob's Creek, Lindemans, Jamieson's Run; and the list goes on. The vines were in fine foliage and fruit could be seen amongst the green leaves.

The Coonawarra Vignerons have published an excellent brochure, Coonawarra Grapegrowers, that has a lot of interesting facts and figures (and from which I shall quote in this article). There were 5057 hectares (ha) under vine in 2000, compared with 450 ha that were planted in the 1960s. The distribution of grape varieties in 2000 was (Variety/Ha):

Red Wines

Cabernet Sauvignon 2747

Cabernet Franc 55

Merlot 388

Pinot Noir 114

Shiraz 990

Other Red 35

Total Red 4329

White Wines

Chardonnay 399

Riesling 247

Sauvignon Blanc 62

Semillon 9

Other White 10

Total White 727

John Riddoch was the founder of Coonawarra. He obtained a large pastoral holding in 1852 and subsequently encouraged immigration and closer settlement "to give a fresh impulse to the prosperity of the district."

There have been three distinct periods in the development of Coonawarra as a wine district:
≈ Early settlement until the First World War;

≈ The Great Depression and between the two World Wars; and

≈ The period from 1951 when Samuel Wynn purchased Riddoch Cellars and initiated the renaissance of the district.

Coonawarra has a cool climate, which allows the vines a relatively long time to ripen the grapes. The district averages 591.5 mm of rain per year and 7.6 hours of sunshine daily through the growing season. The Terra Rossa soils are approximately 2 – 4 metres thick over limestone and are approximately 1.5 kilometres wide and 20 kilometres long. The district is 57 metres above sea level, and has a typically flat topography. One brochure that I acquired claims that “Coonawarra is Australia’s southernmost wine producing area.” I think that the Mornington Peninsula and Tasmanian winegrowers would dispute that claim.

At 3.00 pm (SA time) we arrived at Brand’s of Coonawarra Winery and met up with the members of the South Australian Wine Guild for a tour of the winery. It was interesting to see the height of the vines above ground level. I think that the tops of the vines were about 2 metres above the ground – a distinct contrast to vines I have seen elsewhere.

Our host, Jim Brand, gave us an introduction to the processes at the winery. In 2001 approximately 4000 tonnes was processed from 800 acres. Brands processes approximately 700 tonnes per year and sends the rest to other processors to crush. We were able to taste a 2001 Riesling and a 2001 Chardonnay, plus a 2000 Shiraz, 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon and a 1999 Cabernet Merlot. I shan’t attempt to describe the wines, but was pleasantly surprised at how the Shiraz was complemented by the cheese that was also available. Brands is now owned by McWilliams and further information is available at www.mcwilliams.com.au

After making purchases, we boarded the coach to travel to Mt Gambier and our motel, after stopping and viewing the famous Blue Lake.

We arrived at the Motel and were allocated rooms. Unfortunately 5 members and guests had to be accommodated two motels up the street for the Saturday night, but were able to join us at our motel for the Sunday night.

Pre-dinner drinks were in the lobby of the motel, and a pleasant meal was enjoyed by all. The dinner was a great opportunity for South Australian and Victoria members to mingle and swap wine experiences. The mingling was made easier by the company enjoying wines from some of the vigneron that we were unable to visit on this tour. We are most grateful to the wine companies that contributed so generously to the occasion.

Sunday 9th March 2003

After a pleasant breakfast in the motel, we joined the coach to visit the first of the five wineries that we were to attend. The trip from Mt. Gambier to Penola is about 52 km of slightly changing countryside. It was interesting to see how the countryside varied from grazing land to pine plantations to eucalypt forests.

The first stop was at Bowen Wines, where we were introduced to the wines by Doug and Joy Bowen. Bowen Estate was established in 1972 and is family owned and managed. The 35 ha vineyard is planted with Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Chardonnay vines. Wines tasted included a 2001 Chardonnay, 2000 Shiraz, 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot/Cabernet Franc and a 1998 Ampelon. Ampelon is a classical Greek word meaning “vineyard” (or so I was told). We also tasted a 1980 Cabernet Sauvignon which was superb. The colour was very deep, and the wine had a beautifully soft taste all through it. If this is the first of a typical Coonawarra winery, we are in for a great day.

All agreed that Bowen Estate’s wines, particularly the reds, were worthy to commence the day. Bowen Estate may be contacted by email at bowenest@coonawarra.mtx.net.au

We moved to Zema Estate where Matt Zema provided a short introduction to the family winery. Zema Estate produced a magnificent brochure about the winery, the region, the family business, and tasting notes. The professional presentation was certainly matched by the tasting of the wines. Matt said that Zema Estate is the only winery in the area in which all the processes from vine to wine are completed

by the one company. All product going from the cellar door is cultivated, processed, bottled, labelled and sold from vines grown on Zema Estate vineyards or through their national network of wine distributors

Some magnificent wines were tasted. We had the pleasure of tasting six different wines, each of which stood alone as a great example of red wines from Coonawarra. Zema Estate is online at www.zema.com.au

From Zema Estate we went to Hollick Wines (pictured) where we tasted 2002 Riesling, 2002 Sauvignon Blanc Semillon, 2001 Reserve Chardonnay, 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot, 2001 Shiraz Cabernet Sauvignon and 1999 Ravenswood Cabernet Sauvignon. Ravenswood is only released when the wine satisfies the exacting quality parameters set by the Hollick team.

Hollick Wines is established on one of the original Riddock Coonawarra original selections. 52 ha are under vine. Two thirds is planted to red varieties including Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Shiraz and Pinot Noir (one of only two growers in the district). White varieties planted are Chardonnay, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon.

I had Lamb Shanks, which were beautifully prepared and presented; as were the sweets. Some members had Roast Pork, and this course got a mixed review – some were happy but others were slightly disappointed with the dish. From my perspective, the meal was great, the wines were superb, the service exceeded expectations and the ambience was marvellous. All in all, a wonderful experience. www.hollick.com is the online address.

From Hollicks, we headed to Wynns of Coonawarra. The vision of the triple-gabled winery was a welcome sight to all of us who had seen the famous drawing that is iconic of Wynn's Coonawarra Wines. Our hostess was Katie Hughes, who welcomed us and provided a range of wines for us to taste in a relaxed atmosphere.

Detailed information on Wynns Coonawarra Estate and its wines is available at www.wynns.com.au

And so on to Redman Wines for our last tasting of the day. Redmans have been involved in winemaking in the Coonawarra district since 1901, when Bill and Albert Redman commenced working for John Riddoch. William eventually started his own vineyard in 1908, and three generations of Redmans have been making wine in the Coonawarra over the past 90 years.

Dinner this evening was at the R.S. L. Club in Mt. Gambier. The meal was typical, the wines were quite nice, (including Riddoch 2000 Shiraz and Jamieson Run 2001 Shiraz and a Chardonnay from Eaglehawk Wines [Guild Cellar]) and the bon hommie amongst Victorians and South Australians was great. Some people walked to Umpherston Sinkhole (pictured in daylight) to see the gardens at night. While some others had a quick dash down to it on the Monday morning. Like the Blue Lake, the Sink was well worth viewing.

Monday 10th March

Loaded the coach with people and luggage, and set off for Rymill Coonawarra, the Riddoch Run Vineyard. After travelling on the Riddoch Highway for three days between Mt. Gambier and Coonawarra, and passing some famous vineyards on a number of occasions, one member was heard to say this morning, "Ooh! Look at all the vines!" What would you expect if you went to a winegrowing area?

Rymill is located at the northern end of the Coonawarra area. The bus approached the winery between two rows of European Plane Trees. They hinted at something special. And we were not disappointed.

The entrance to the winery was flanked by one side by a large bronze sculpture of two stallions rampart, sculptured by Paris based sculptor, Gariel Sterk. A pond-full of goldfish guard the entrance to the winery, which is constructed from Mount Gambier limestone. The winery offers superb panoramic views of the countryside.

We were hosted by Andrew Rymill, assisted by Jane Rogers (pictured with our President). Andrew told us that his brother and sister in law own the property and had established the Riddoch Run Vineyards in 1974, and the Rymill Winery in 1990.

Andrew introduced us to the Rymill Wines range, including The Bee's Knees, a bottle fermented, medium-bodied sparkling red (50% Cabernet Franc, 25% Cabernet Sauvignon and 25% Merlot), and the Coonawarra mc2 (33% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc and 62% Cabernet Sauvignon).

Unfortunately we had to leave Rymill Wines and head to Penola for lunch prior to heading back home. Lunch at the historic (1848) Royal Oak Hotel was delightful, Grilled Atlantic Salmon, or beautifully prepared Roast Beef, Fruit Salad and Ice Cream, Tira Misu or Chocolate Mud Cake.

And so, back home to Melbourne. It was a great weekend, thanks to the planning by Bob Bailey and his family, the treats provided by Barbara Cecchi, the good-fellowship with our South Australian colleagues, and the generosity of all the wineries, who were so proud of their product, and made us so welcome.

The wineries we visited may be contacted as listed below:

- § www.mcwilliams.com.au Brands Winery
- § bowenest@coonawarra.mtx.net.au Bowen Estate
- § www.zema.com.au Zema Estate
- § www.hollick.com Hollick Winery
- § www.wynns.com.au Wynns Coonawarra
- § www.redman.com.au Redman Wines
- § www.rymill.com.au Rymill Coonawarra