

Function Report - Griffith Wine Tour

9th, 10th & 11th June 2001

4.53 a.m. Ring Ring. "Hello" mumbled ungraciously into the phone. "Good morning - are you awake?" "Good morning Bob," say I so very, very sweetly. "See you at a quarter to six - there are six of us leaving from Narre Warren", says Bob. So commenced the Wine Services Guild trip to Griffith.

5.50 a.m. Bus arrives out front - we load wine, tea, coffee etc. Bob arrives with ice for the bubbly white for our lunch. We set off, quite oblivious to the fact that Bob has left Helen's cosmetic case in their car!

Travel along Monash freeway and collect Dominic, then on to Murrumbeena Bowling Club to collect the crowd who met at Louis' home. We are only 5 minutes behind time! On to Doncaster, quickly load luggage and proceed to Coburg for the last three voyagers. What with Bob's bon homie and Andrew's irrepressible good spirits we were now set for a really good tour. Andrew provided us with an individual itinerary and briefing on Griffith - a very nice touch.

Leaving Coburg we were five minutes behind time - it really makes a good start to a trip when all those travelling arrive at the pick up point prior to the scheduled departure time.

It was nice to be driven up the Hume Highway with the welcome sight of windscreen wipers swishing to and fro. There was a strange substance falling from above - I think it is called rain, but it is so long since I have seen any, I am unsure if it really is wet. Just north of Kilmore we had our traditional orange juice, and some mini muffins provided by Barb Cecchi.

We arrived at the scheduled coffee break near Pretty Sally too early, (and it was raining) so we continued on to Nagambie. Pulled up outside shops that had a nice veranda. Many hands helped unload table and coffee etc, and we enjoyed coffee (some with brandy), rolls, cream cheese and smoked salmon. Naturally there was some paté provided.

Departing Nagambie Barbara Cecchi handed out a trivial pursuit game - 46 questions to while the time away. The questions were good for young people of our age - some of the young people would probably not be aware of Virginia Wade or the song "Up, Up and Away". It certainly helped to fill in the time as we traveled along the flat countryside between Nagambie and Shepparton.

Got to scheduled lunch stop at Tocumwal 40 minutes early. Obviously this was a sneaky ploy by the women who had not told the gentlemen in the party that there was a large market located just where we were to have lunch. All the women were extremely happy, while the males were grabbing their respective spouse's handbags and confiscating the credit cards. The ten-minute toilet break only lasted for half an hour, and we continued on to Finley where we had lunch.

The basket lunch was provided by Barbara Cecchi - mini quiche, savory meat and salad and some cheese. The meal was accompanied by a Jacob Creek champagne style wine (beautifully chilled in the tub in the bus), Yalumba unwooded chardonnay. Devotees of red wines were catered for with Rosemount Cabernet Sauvignon. The wines certainly complimented a nice light meal that was most suitable for travelling.

We arrived at Hanwood a tad early, so we had the chance to look around the beautiful gardens at the winery. We also admired the painted window over the entrance to the tasting room (pictured). The painting is much better from inside the room than from outside.

Our host for the tasting was the winemaker at Hanwood, Scott McWilliam, ably assisted by his fiancée, Nora Broring. Wines tasted from Hanwood, the Riverina property established by John James McWilliam in 1913, included Hanwood Chardonnay, Hanwood Merlot 2000, Hanwood Cabernet 2000 and Hanwood Shiraz.

Scott introduced us to the Barwang range of wines. Barwang is a vineyard near Young N.S.W. established in 1969, and acquired by McWilliams in 1989. We tasted Barwang Chardonnay 1998, Barwang Cabernet 1999 and Barwang Shiraz.

The CSIRO developed four new wine grape varieties in 2000 - Tyrian, Cienna, Vermillion and Rubienne. Tyrian is a product of a cross between the Spanish wine variety Sumoll, and Cabernet Sauvignon. McWilliams lead the evaluation of Tyrian. Tyrian has a deep color, with high tannins and has excellent aging potential. I think that we were in agreement that the McWilliams Tyrian 2000 is well worth purchasing. The McWilliams Riverina Botrytis Semillon 1997 also was a most popular purchase.

Scott showed us Margaret River Semillon. He told us that he drew off the wine from barrels at approximately midday (we commenced tasting at 3.15), and he said that it still needed a little more time - perhaps a couple of weeks. At time of writing this report it has probably been bottled. I think that it was great to drink as it was.

I think McWilliams were quite happy for the Guild to visit them - I know we were happy to visit McWilliams. I thought that it was a very civilized way of tasting fine wine. We sat at tables of ten (with real napery), with a list of wines provided by Scott McWilliams. The wines were great, and Scott's commentary was first class.

And so, on to the Gemini Motel where we rested for a very short time before our Wine Makers Dinner.

The Wine Makers Dinner in Picasso's Restaurant at the motel was a typical Guild dinner. Food was lovely, and the wines that President Bob chose complemented the meal. The menu included
Entrée Biscotti di Mare (Bream Fillet)
Rotolin Di Polla (Stuffed Chicken Breast)

Main Course Pepper Crusted Rack of Veal
Quail

Dessert Tiramisu
Crepe

Sunday morning dawned. Sprung out of bed, went to shave, shower etc and found no water available in the motel. Apparently there was a breakdown at the water pumping station and the whole town was dry. We were inconvenienced until about 8.00 a.m., and realized the importance of water, and how much we take its supply for granted. We did get to the stage of cleaning teeth with champagne, but it was on the cards.

First stop was Rosetto's Winery. Rosetto's was established in 1930. It is a family owned winery that crushes about 12,000 tonnes annually. A number of contract growers provide stock to supplement the grapes from their Beelgara Estate. A feature of this tasting was some fortifieds in the "Bailey's Irish Cream" style.

We then went on to De Bortoli's. Approaching the winery we were in awe at the size of the tank farm. Oz Clarke's Wine Guide (on the Internet) describes De Bortoli's as "A large family-owned winery with a keen eye to export markets. A sublime Botrytis Semillon called Noble One is head and shoulders above the rest, along with a fine dry Botrytis Semillon to complement it". I would not disagree.

At Piromit wines Paul Hudson, one of the owners of the winery, gave us a tour of this new winery. Piromit Wines is a relatively new winery. It was constructed in time for the 1999 vintage, and crushes one thousand tonnes of grapes. It was interesting to contrast the state of the art production processes at Piromit with the older styles of wine making that we are more accustomed to seeing. They only require two or three people to run the winery, because computers control the operation. This will affect employment prospects in country towns if the practice becomes widespread. However, Piromit makes great wines.

We had lunch at Piromit. They do not have a restaurant there yet, but we had a gourmet B.B.Q. provided by Ring Drummy Catering. Food was great, and the soap sold by the caterer (who is a butcher by trade) is pleasant on the skin; however I do not think it matches his claims re clearing up skin cancer). We had some different foods for lunch - kangaroo and goat sound terrible, but they

tasted good. Wine tasting is a very personal thing - but I think all agreed that the 2000 Verdelho is a marvelous wine.

After lunch we had a change of plans and went to Riverina Wines. They had a band playing as part of their launch of a new range of wines. Some preferred to listen to the band rather than taste wine.

And so after about an hour or so tasting and listening to music we went to our last winery for the day - Miranda Wines.

I think we were becoming slightly jaded by this time, but quite a few people enjoyed the wines, particularly their fortified styles.

We had dinner at the Griffiths Leagues Club, which was quite pleasant, and a few tried their luck at the pokies. I did not hear of any one breaking the bank - but all enjoyed themselves.

A feature in the main street of Griffiths is the soldier-settler memorial. Many farms around Griffiths were established by the soldier-settler scheme after World War 1. The memorial depicts the first generation passing a rifle to the next generation to go to fight in World War 2. You can see a plough in the background. This reflects the extensive farming in the area - grapes and citrus trees in particular. There are also many laser-graded paddocks that are obviously used to grow rice. In some of the paddies there were some sheep grazing on the stubble.

On Monday we embussed and headed off to Leeton, where we were introduced to Lillipilli Wines. This was another delight. To me the highlights were their 2000 Tramillon (a carefully selected blend of Traminer and Semillon grapes), and the 2000 Red Velvet - a blend of many varieties of grape including Merlot, Carignane, Ruby Cabernet, Zinfandel, St. Magaire, Tarrango, Durif, Touriga, Mondeuse, Chambourcin, Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon. This is a very small winery, only crushing about 180 tonnes of their own grapes - they do not use any grapes other than what they grow themselves. Robert and Sam Fiumara, the winemakers, allowed us to taste a 1976 Cabernet Port - made from the first grapes grown on the property.

After lunch at the Leeton Returned Services Club, back on to the bus and headed back to Melbourne. The return trip was uneventful - stopped at Nagambie again for coffee etc and reached the drop off points in Melbourne pretty well on time.

Everyone thought it was a great trip - our thanks go to President Bob, and his wife Helen, who carried out the reconnaissance and made all the arrangements for what was a truly magnificent tour. Thanks also go to Barbara Cecchi who provided the nibbles and lunch on Saturday, and Peter of Pakenham Buses who transported us safely on the tour. If the Swan Hill trip is half as good as this one, no one will be disappointed.