



STEPHEN HENSCHKE

Legendary Australian winemaker harvests a passion for Golf.

For a wine lover, visiting the Henschke winery and spending time in the company of Stephen Henschke – revered winemaker, the Grand Master of the Barons of the Barossa, a member of Australia’s First Family of Wines and now a keen golfer - was possibly akin in golf terms to securing a tee time at Augusta National.

Henschke is the fifth generation guardian of the rich heritage at Henschke, in the Eden Valley region of the Barossa, taking over in 1979 from his late father Cyril who himself, was the youngest of 12 children.

Winemakers, especially those that have a bloodline in the industry dating back to the 19th century like Henschke, are a remarkably engaging, energetic and down to earth breed.

However, it is the passion and knowledge they bring to their craft that is so captivating, as is their willingness to share this knowledge with anyone who takes an active interest. They take enormous pride in their work, are highly supportive of each other and dedicated to preserving the legacy that has been forged by the blood, sweat and tears of their families throughout the years.

Henschke are celebrating a number of milestones in 2012 with the 50th vintage of the iconic ‘Hill of Grace’ Shiraz and the 60th of the premium ‘Mount Edelstone’ Shiraz, from a vineyard planted nearby 100 years ago. These two wines from separate single vineyards are cornerstones of a superb range of white and red wines that are available at the Henschke cellar door 6 days per week and exported to most countries throughout the world.

Not for Henschke though, the trappings of a modern day cellar door ‘facility’. There are no elaborate modern day tasting rooms or restaurants that you might find at other wineries and wine regions. The small, unassuming cellar door is likely to be the most recent addition to a stone building that was built by hand, added to and repaired from the abundant stone available in the local Mt Lofty Ranges, by each generation of Henschkes.

The building that houses the entire Henschke operation has been the original working winery but also horse stable, part farm and with the adjacent, 4 bedroom stone farmhouse, the home to every Henschke generation - including Stephen and his wife and viticulturalist, Prue.

Their three children, the future 6th generation, have grown up and moved on to study and work but are indelibly linked to the family’s wine making tradition. Their eldest son, Johann, studied winemaking at the University of Adelaide and is currently travelling the world doing further study and participating in vintages at wineries in the United States and Europe.

Henschke points to a section of the winery where his father Cyril kept horses to help run the vineyard and the

small room in which we sat was the old milk cellar, where he had the job of separating milk and cleaning hen eggs as a child. The buildings are not just dripping with history but quite literally have it etched into the walls, telling the story of vintages’ past. The words ‘1901 – 1660 gallons’ are carved into a stone on the side of the winery’s first fermentation tank, recording for posterity the quantity of wine produced that year.

The head of a deer shot by Henschke’s grandfather in nearby fields hangs above an adjacent stone doorway, forming part of the Henschke logo that has remained unchanged since its first iteration. For Henschke, tradition is of paramount importance in the wine making process and the running of the winery and is stoutly defended. ‘Tradition is very important to us. When it lets you down, you change it but if it works, you

maintain it’.

One fascinating example of observing traditional methods is the study of the lunar cycle which Henschke says, is a remarkably reliable guide. ‘Basically, we get a significant wet season or two every 18.6 years on the Lunar cycle. 2011 was a very wet year and if you take it back to 1992, 1974, 1956 and even 1938, they were all very wet vintages.

‘I saw (veteran winemaker) Colin Gramp recently, who must be nearly 90 now, and he told me that ‘38 was so wet, they had to carry the grapes out of the vineyard in buckets.’

‘We did get some really beautiful whites in 2011, very zesty, tightly wound Rieslings that will mature beautifully over many years but unfortunately, the red wine grapes for our top end wines were too compromised by the weather so

Photo by: Mark Wilson



we didn't make them, just like in '74. The 2012 vintage was a very different story though, they will be fantastic.'

Using the Biodynamic Calendar, Henschke can also predict with a very high degree of accuracy the best times to harvest their grapes each year, which usually corresponds with Easter.

Family values are also extremely important to Henschke and it's through his family that he has been lured to golf in recent years. His wife Prue is 'the golfer in the family', according to Henschke, and what drove his interest in playing the game was the opportunity to share a similar interest with Prue and their youngest son Andreas, who is also a keen golfer.

'Usually you're the taxi driver on Saturdays taking your kids here and there to sport. This is the one time the three of us get to do something together, it's really fantastic.'

The Henschkes are also members of a group of multi-generational family owned wineries known as 'Australia's First Families of Wine' and he

says one of the key aspects of the alliance that he derives great personal satisfaction from is that the next generations are starting to meet, network and become friends just as his generation have become.

Henschke points out that the wine and food culture in Australia is so precious and important, with the icon vineyards, special labels and great wines, something people in other countries are only just starting to learn about for themselves. 'Australia didn't just happen in the last 10 minutes. We've got vines in Australia that are over 150 years old, older than anywhere in the world.'

'We have wonderful history, true stories, heritage and fantastic wine from fantastic vineyards in Australia. Sometimes you just have to remind people why we're here and what we're doing, especially overseas. What we're doing in Australia is equal to, if not better, than anywhere else in the world.'

In between promoting this rich heritage and their wines, the Henschkes now try to fit

in a round of golf where they can when travelling around the world. 'The most beautiful place we've played was up in the mountains at Rioja in Spain. It was at the Izki course at Urturi (designed by the late Severiano Ballesteros) and the scenery was stunning, there was hardly anyone around, all these wild animals roaming across the course.'

The Henschkes are regulars most Saturdays at the scenic Tanunda Pines Golf Club ('Royal & Ancient Tanunda') in the Barossa Valley, while Prue also maintains a membership at Glenelg Golf Club in Adelaide where she grew up.

The Henschkes often play with other Barossa winemakers and the winemaking fraternity, including Stuart Blackwell (St Hallett), Robert Hill Smith (Yalumba) and Robert O'Callaghan (Rockford). While they may be business rivals, supporters, friends and colleagues in the winemaking trade, golf among the winemakers is far from a cut throat, competitive outlet for them. 'It's all about getting

together and having fun' Henschke said.

The highlight of many highlights in the visit to Henschke was the opportunity to drive out with Stephen Henschke to the remote vineyard that produces the iconic 'Hill of Grace' Shiraz, Australia's greatest single vineyard wine. Henschke's family planted these vines from around 1860, which Henschke was interested to learn was also the year the British Open was first contested at Prestwick in Scotland, and he commented that they are more precious than any building could ever be.

'You can repair or replace an historic building, but if anything happened to these vines, they can't be replaced. It would take another 150 years.' Henschke said of the now gnarled, twisted stumps, some as thick as your torso, in the oldest block known as 'The Grandfathers' that produce dry grown Shiraz grapes of such concentrated flavours.

A bottle of the latest release of Hill of Grace, the 2007 vintage, was opened in The Grandfathers block and was shared by Henschke among the very vines planted by his ancestors. The wine itself is of such marvellous quality with a rich, textured mouth feel and flavours that have been so highly regarded the world over.

With Henschke on hand providing his personal insights into the wine and the naturally organic techniques that are carefully planned and orchestrated to tend to his prized and ancient crop, for anyone with a sense of occasion and history not the least an appreciation of fine wine, could it possibly get any better than this?



Paul Prendergast
Twitter: @paulprendo



Photo by: Mark Wilson