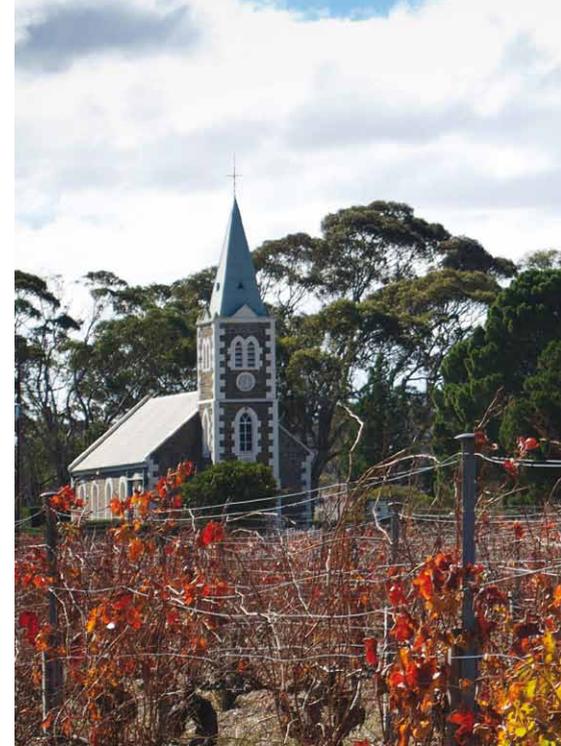


The tradition continues

One of Australia's most legendary wineries, Henschke, celebrates a number of milestones in 2012.

words Paul Prendergast photography Mark Wilson



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 – is a once in a lifetime opportunity to savour.

Stephen 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. They take enormous pride in their work and are 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 exceptional wines from separate single vineyards are cornerstones of a superb range of white and red wines, from the family vineyards in the Eden Valley and Adelaide Hills, that are available at the Henschke cellar door

and from all fine wine locations.

Not for Henschke though, the trappings of a modern day cellar door 'facility'. There are none of the elaborate tasting rooms or restaurants that are plentiful in other locations. The small, unassuming cellar door is likely to be the most recent addition to a stone building that was built by hand, then added to and repaired from the abundant stone 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 and, along with the adjacent, four bedroom stone farmhouse, home to every Henschke generation – including Stephen and his wife and viticulturalist, Prue.

Stephen 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 Stephen'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 strongly defended.

"Tradition is very important to us. When it lets you down, you change it but if it works, you maintain it."

Stephen explained the use of the Biodynamic Calendar which they rely upon to inform their harvest times each year and the study of the lunar cycle which he 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.

"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 we didn't make them, just like in 1974. The 2012 vintage was a very different story though, they will be fantastic."

The Henschkes are also members of a group of multi-generational family owned wineries known as 'Australia's First Families of Wine' and Stephen says one of the key aspects of the alliance that



he derives great personal satisfaction from is that the next generations who will carry on the family legacies are starting to meet, network and become friends, just as his generation have become.

Stephen 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 discover for themselves.

“Australia didn’t just happen in the last ten minutes. We’ve got vines in Australia that are over 150 years old, older than anywhere in the world.

“We have a 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.’

The Henschkes are regular golfers in their spare time and are enthusiastic members at the scenic Tanunda Pines Golf Club (‘Royal & Ancient Tanunda’) in the Barossa, where they often play with other winemakers from the region. Both Stephen and Prue also take the opportunity to fit in a round of golf where they can when travelling around the world promoting Henschke wine.

“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 Seve

Ballesteros) and the scenery was stunning, there was hardly anyone around, all these wild animals roaming across the course.”

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.

Stephen’s family planted these vines from around 1860 and he says 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, 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.”

A bottle of the latest release of Hill of Grace, the 2007 vintage, was opened and savoured in The Grandfathers block on a crisp autumn day among the very vines planted by Henschke’s ancestors.

With Stephen 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, there was a great a sense of occasion and history. For anyone with an appreciation of fine wine, it couldn’t possibly get any better than this. ●