



The Taste of a

LEGACY

A New Generation Honour Master-Winemakers Legacy

WORDS Michelle Meehan

When you're working with 138-year-old vines, it's not difficult to appreciate the importance of the past.

So, it's hardly surprising to find that when **Mount Pleasant Wines** decided to give their Pokolbin cellar door a facelift, paying homage to that history was at the top of their to-do list.

Located on Marrowbone Road at the southern end of Hunter Valley vineyard region, Mount Pleasant Wines is home to the oldest block of pinot grapes in Australia.

English immigrant Charles Hill planted the Old Hill Vineyard in 1880, his vines taking root deep in the rich volcanic soils in the Parish of Pokolbin.

Forty-one years later the son of a wine and spirit merchant came along and purchased the 16.3-hectare property and two adjoining parcels of land – and from there, an Australian wine legacy was born.

After renaming the property Mount Pleasant in 1921, Maurice O'Shea began his pioneering work producing what went on to become some of the most highly regarded red wines in Australia.

A master winemaker with a remarkable palate, O'Shea's blending techniques and sophisticated use of oak – talents learnt while studying oenology at France's Montpellier University – were credited with producing red table wines of enormous flavour, intensity and longevity.

It is this legacy that Mount Pleasant's current chief winemaker Adrian Sparks wanted to honour as part of the recent renovations at the site, dressing up the cellar door with new fixtures and furniture to create a comfortable and welcoming environment where visitors can sit back and appreciate the beauty and history of the vineyard and the wine they are tasting.

"On Marrowbone Road we've got our cellar door, and we've got our Members Lounge, which we're currently putting some nice history in, some photos and some old books to explain what Mount Pleasant means, so people can get a real experience when they come in," Adrian said.

"With our cellar door renovations we wanted to create a more inviting place to sit and have a drink, so we've included a few new couches to make it a bit more comfortable, given it a paint job and some new benchtops just to make it a lot more relaxing, to allow you to truly lose yourself in the place when you drink those wines.

"All our main vineyards surround the building, so you can sit out the front of the cellar door and look up to the Old Hill, which today is 138 years old.

"And then around that, looking out from the deck, you can look

straight over the Mothervine pinot, the oldest pinot blocks in Australia.

"So you're surrounded by the vines, and you can taste the wines made from those vines that you're surrounded by, which is pretty cool."

Adrian said a visit to Mount Pleasant Wines' cellar door always offered more than just another stop on the wine tasting trail.

“ “ We want to educate and tell the story because Mount Pleasant has got one of the greatest stories not only in the Hunter Valley but in Australia and we want to be able to follow that story and tell it correctly.

"To do that it's about getting people here to relax and then put a glass of wine in front of them, explain all about the wine, explain where it comes from, what's in the soils and why that has an impact on the wine that they're drinking and what it means.

"I like to tell people why we make a wine, not really how we make a wine.

"I think the why is very important... I don't like to sit there and tell people what they can smell and can't smell; I just think that's boring. But what I really think you need to explain to someone is what is so special about this wine and the vine and the history of those grapes."

Adrian has spent a long time himself trying to learn and understand what is so special about Mount Pleasant – a knowledge that he is now using to create a legacy of his own.

The Riverina-born winemaker has worked for the McWilliams Group, which owns Mount Pleasant Wines since he was studying chemistry in the late 1990's at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga.

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A part-time job in the cellar door to earn some cash eventually morphed into a full-time career in the laboratory, with Adrian switching his studies to learn more about winemaking both on the job and by distance education.

After working his way up through the company to the position of senior winemaker, Adrian was asked to relocate from Griffith to the Hunter Valley in 2014 to join the chief winemaker Jim Chatto at Mount Pleasant.

He spent four years working with Jim before both men were once again promoted; Jim to the position of chief winemaker of the McWilliam's Group, and Adrian to the top job at Mount Pleasant.

As only the fifth chief winemaker in the 98-year history of the winery, Adrian is following in the footsteps of some of Australia's most celebrated winemaking alumni including the late great O'Shea, Phil Ryan and the highly celebrated Chatto.

But he is already off to a great start with the 2017 vintage, his first at the helm in the Hunter, scooping a swag of awards including the Old Paddock & Old Hill Shiraz winning the NSW Governor's Trophy for Best in Show at the 2018 NSW Wine Awards last October.

This has been the pinnacle of a fantastic show season for Adrian, with the winery having already received eight trophies for their 2017 vintage wines.

While he was overjoyed with the success, Adrian said his goals at chief winemaker didn't revolve around awards.

"You don't set out to win a wine show, it's a lucky thing that you get, and you take it when you get it, and you know, sometimes the best wines win wine shows, and sometimes they don't," he said.

“ I’m more interested in just being true to what I believe in terms of winemaking, being true to the site, being true to Mount Pleasant and I suppose, true to the history, what O'Shea wanted to make, and what he was thinking when he made his wines.

"I like to try and uphold traditions I suppose; I'm not going to try and change the world in a day, I just want to make beautiful wines that represent the Hunter Valley.



"Wine can tell a story about the history of the vines and the grapes and each wine should really represent where it comes from, the vintage.

A lot of places in the Hunter Valley, a lot of wineries have a house style. If we can speak to all three of those truly, without putting a heavy hand to either three, it's a good result.

"I was always of the opinion that the vineyard was the most dominating character of a wine, but with our vineyards being so old, it's almost like a change in winemaker can really change how that vineyard expresses itself, how they make their wines and how they evolve. ►



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"I think as a winemaker, you have to understand and respect what the winemakers before you were doing. As a result, I've got a good understanding of how Phil (Ryan) made his wines, and working under Jim Chatto also provided so much education about the Hunter Valley and Mount Pleasant.

"And I think that's the most important thing; you need to be at a place to understand it, you can't just walk into a winery and make the best wines from day dot. You have to understand the vineyards and the blocks and constantly educate yourself and it all takes time, those things all take time.

"I think that's sort of what we've done in the last three years, tried to really understand the vineyards and understand the wine styles and think about what we want to achieve in the future and I think our best wines are still ahead of us." ■



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