

My Vintage Year :

Where we interview wine people. They may be your fellow guild members or significant others in the Wine Industry. Was this their vintage year: Dave Chambers



FAMILY OWNED & RUN SINCE 1858

Today it is Stephen Chambers. Of Chambers Rosewood Vineyards

A Barrel Room, it's what I want for Xmas. Have you, like me, been fortunate enough to tour Chambers Barrel Room at Rutherglen. A treat for all the senses, the walls whitewashed old, quaint farmhouse old. The building is a large structure. Massive oak barrels are lined up like soldiers throughout the space. There is a delicious bouquet of blended smells pervading your senses as you walk quietly amongst the massive casks. Many of these barrels go back to another century, another time when life at the vineyard was easier and simple. Indeed, a slower time, when tradition dictated how wine was made, a tradition passed down from father to son through several generations. The Chambers family has been in Rutherglen for as many generations as wine has been made in Australia. Chambers Rosewood is one of those old family run wineries that live and breath history from the walls to the old barrels. Some of those barrels built by a Smithwick long days gone by. And George Smithwick is the Great Grandson of the builder of some of those barrels. And George built my Muscat Barrel for me, twelve months ago. Just saying.

Stephen Chambers now has the reins at Rosewood and is a willing Interviewee and as you will see below is keen to forge a name for himself in the famous old winery. There are wine families in Australia that are national treasures and we as a nation do not celebrate that enough. The Chambers family is near the top of that list.

Dave: You would have had an ideal childhood being raised at a property located on a vineyard in such an historic spot. Also not far from the most iconic river in Australia the mighty Murray. What are your earliest fond memories of growing up in that time and place?

Stephen: There are so many memories not just about wine though, as we do have a farm as well. Winery wise some of the earliest memories was helping out in winery with the transfers of wine by manning the pump pushing the on and off buttons on the old impeller pumps with brass housing and listening for the shouts of go and whoa. On the farm it was helping moving the sheep from paddock to paddock with the occasional day off school when it took longer to move the sheep than expected.

Dave: I understand there is a closeness, a bond if you like with others of your generation from wine families, raised amongst the old river gums of Wahgunyah and Rutherglen. Jen Pfeiffer had fond memories of this time. Do you also find this is true?

Stephen: Yes, though I must admit as the youngest of the family, I was always hanging around with older members of other winemaking families like the Gehrigs. Spent a lot of time with my older cousins at Lakeside another Chambers property now operated as Lake Moodemere Estate by my cousin Michael, his wife Belinda and their son Joel.



Dave: What is your first experience that you remember that led to an interest in wine?

Stephen: Quite possibly it is also related to my first couple of attempts at making wine. I made my first micro batch of wine at the age of 12 from Muscat grapes with a wild ferment at home. I then tried it with red wine with skin contact in an ice cream container; unfortunately here it turned to a haven for vinegar flies and turned acetic. The following year I tried again using yeast provided by my father, but in this case I think I was heavy handed on the yeast addition as I lost the varietal characters and it was dominated by the yeast.

Dave: What did the impact of Parker's 100 points for your Rare Rutherglen Muscat have on the winery in terms of pride in your product and acknowledgement that your family had made something really special in the world of wine. Not to put too fine a point to this, but he claimed this was a national treasure. An incredible honour for your effort. Did this change anything in your day to day running of the vineyard. I notice Jen Pfeiffer's question is in a similar vein?

Stephen: There were a few things that resulted from this recognition. Firstly it precipitated a major planting program to increase our area under Muscat. It also resulted in a change in the blending of the Rutherglen Muscat. Prior to our success in the US we had been using a solera for the Rutherglen, however with such large volumes being sold (well for us large), using a solera was creating work for works sake without the benefits of what running this system has in the final product. We are still dealing with the impacts of this 20 years later. It must be noted though that we did go to great lengths to protect the Rare Muscat and were clear from the beginning that there would be times it would not be available to the market.

Dave: There are many occasions to party when your parents own a vineyard. Can you tell us about the wildest party you attended. Probably in your

youth but maybe not?

Stephen: Can't remember..... maybe it was too wild.

Dave: What are you making now that excites you?

Stephen: There are a few things that we are tinkering with. Be it the Shiraz Mondeuse, or the Tempranillo, we are always fine tuning. Also, currently been cleaning off decades of ingrained dirt off the old casks in the winery as well as replacing the old iron coach bolts with stainless steel ones.



Jen Pfeiffer has a Guest Question for you:

Question: My question for Stephen Chambers is:

Stephen, you have been very lucky to become the custodian of one of the great fortified houses in Rutherglen, and inherit a history of around 150 years of continuous wine production.

Please describe what that responsibility means to you and what you think you might change in your fortified winemaking approach, if you were starting from scratch?

Stephen: It puts a lot of pressure on you to ensure you make the right choice when selecting the single vintage wines to top the older soleras. Potentially, some of this pressure is self-imposed on oneself striving to maintain the high standard set by previous generations. Not sure whether I can do justice to the latter part of the question as it will be biased by experience. I am however willing to explore tinkering with some techniques as things have obviously changed from when my father started.

Dave: How much of your wine making skills do you attribute to your early years growing up in the vineyard. Do you think this has helped you make more interesting wine?

Stephen: It is a combination of things. Most of the philosophy applied to the fortified winemaking is derived from growing up around the winery and drawing on the experiences of my father. Table wine wise not so much though. We tend to make wine styles we like to drink and hope there are enough people out there who share similar tastes. Of course at times you have to make wine that while they are commercially successful that you wouldn't drink much of.

Dave: Are you in to the intellectual part of the discussion about wine. Wine can be so many things to so many people. But what does it bring to you?

Stephen: Hmm, interesting question. Some of the intellectual discussions about wine interest me, while others do not enthrall me at all and I tune out.

Dave: Are you a pedantic fussy wine maker or do you prefer to feel your way along steady as she goes. It will work out in the end?

Stephen: Bit of both really. Pedantic about some of the aspects of table wine making such as ensuring tanks are not left on ullage for too long. Though with fortified wines it is about the long game so a little bit more relaxed there.

Dave: What is wine making to you. I suspect it is not just a job. But a consuming passion that excites you. Is this true?

Stephen: It varies, it is a constant challenge and is very rewarding when things work out for the better, though deflating when they don't despite everything you may do. It is the challenge that makes it appealing. Though I must say that the last year or so we have probably had a few too many challenges thrown our way.

Dave: What are you excited about for the future of wine making in Australia?

Stephen: Experimenting with new varieties (well not new per se just new to us). Also developments in technology allowing us to move away from some of the winemaking techniques currently undertaken which have unintended impacts on the wine, i.e. every time you use a fining agent to remove an undesired character you can also have an impact on a

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Dave: What inspires you to make better wine. Is it the Gold medals or the knowledge that you are ever improving on your skills from those acquired accolades?

Stephen: All of the above. It's always nice to get third party endorsement regardless of whether it comes from your customers, wine critics or competitions.

Dave: Who or what has been your biggest influence in wine making?

Stephen: There is not one particular thing or person rather a whole combination which have influenced my winemaking.

Dave: What wine that you have made recently are you most proud of?

Stephen: 2016 Anton Ruch (Shiraz Mondeuse) and 2015 Roussanne.

Dave: What have been the positive surprises of becoming aware you were part of such a famous family of Wine Makers?

Stephen: I honestly don't think we are that famous as a family, rather we have had members of the family who are well recognised. I used to think the family was famous when I first went to university; but came to the realisation over time that I was no better than the next person or winemaker and it was up to me to create my own reputation.

.ave: What were you drinking in your twenties?

Stephen: Beer... economic reasons and being a university student.

Dave: If you could tell the young Stephen about life, what advice would you give?

Stephen: Don't drink so much beer, and drink more wine. Don't be so arrogant.

Dave: Enlighten us with a couple of your favourites wine tweaks.

Stephen: I don't really have any favourite wine tweaks; though during ferment oxygen is good.

Dave: I have heard in my short time with the guild some complete disasters while making home made wine. What is your biggest disaster you can share with us that happened in your winery?

Stephen: Not putting a hose on the press tray with the result of the wine going on the floor. Not having the doors on the press on properly; result all the must ending in the press tray rather than the press. Leaking cask doors can also be a disaster, its never nice walking in the front door of the winery to be confronted by a lake of wine on the floor.



Dave: I have asked this question of everyone and so far a hundred percent have said making wine was never a financial consideration. What was the motivation and still is for you after so many years in family wine making?

Stephen: If winemaking was a financial consideration, we wouldn't be doing it, or at the very least not running our own winery. For me in part it was to continue the family legacy.

And Finally

Dave: You are going to a desert island to spend some chill time. You are taking with you one piece of music, one bottle of wine, a book and food. To be clear, that is a choice of one bottle of wine, one meal and so on. What will be placed in your suitcase?

Stephen: Hmm hard to nail down. Wine: A Coonawarra Cabernet maybe a Majella or Bowen Estate. With that in mind a Beef Ragu to pair. Bit hard to nail down the music though. Book: Seven Pillars of Wisdom, have started to read it, but didn't finish it, or maybe "1984" by George Orwell.

