A History of the Tasmanian Wine Industry


Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

University of Tasmania

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Statement of Ethical Conduct

The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government’s Office of the Gene Technology Regulator and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University.
ABSTRACT

Viticulture and winemaking have become important industries in Tasmania, with a rich narrative dating back to the 1820s, but little work had been done on researching and recording this history. This thesis sets out to fill that gap, dividing the history into three distinct phases.

The first, from settlement to 1870 was unsuccessful and it was generally accepted by the end of that phase that Tasmania was “not a wine growing country”. The second brief phase, in the 1880s and 1890s, covers Diego Bernacchi’s attempts to establish a commercial vineyard on Maria Island, with his lack of success confirming the conventional wisdom. By the turn of the century, Tasmania was the only state without a commercial wine industry. The third phase began in the 1950s and has seen the establishment of a vibrant and viable industry, rapidly acquiring an international reputation for premium cool climate wine.

This thesis attempts to explain the apparent contradiction of the failure of the early attempts and the success of the current phase. The central argument is that the difference lies largely in luck and circumstance, rather than any variation in will or effort. I argue that precisely the same factors which mitigated against the success of earlier attempts—climate, technology and public taste—now promote its success. Earlier impediments have become competitive advantages.

I have also examined the social and cultural background of the different eras, and attempted to track the evolving motivations for aspiring vignerons, using McIntyre’s theory of a “civilized industry producing a civilizing drink” in the earlier eras and the concepts of vineyards as “vanity projects” in the current context.

The thesis also attempts to explain why, in comparison with similar regions nationally and internationally, and despite widespread success and praise for its wines, the Tasmanian industry has grown so slowly. I argue that the Australian wine industry has been slow to adapt to changing circumstances, continuing to develop areas which were
initially chosen for fortified wine production, rather than make cool climate investments, despite the evidence of climate change, and evolving public taste.

52 oral history recordings were made in the research for the current era, using a high quality digital recorder, and these will go into a permanent industry archive. The narrative itself has value in providing a permanent record of the beginnings of an important industry, and acknowledging the contributions of its many pioneers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This thesis is dedicated to four men who laid the foundation for today's Tasmanian wine industry

Jean Miguet

Claudio Alcorso

Graham Wiltshire

Andrew Pirie
I have seen many a thousand acres of land worth little for anything but vineyards. Your readers may start at this, but it is true all the same..... It may astonish many to be told that this northern portion of the Island is capable of producing finer and rarer kinds of wine than we can ordinarily grow in Victoria. Our climate is too hot- our autumn at any rate is too hot to admit of our making fine wines like Hock, Sauternes, Chablis, Burgundy etc. The grapes ripen rapidly and the fermentation goes on tumultuously. It is impossible to grow in the same place strong full bodied wines like the ports, sheries and madieras and fine bouquet wines like the sauternes, hock and burgundy. These latter require a particularly cold climate and absolutely demand long and slow fermentation to produce those esters which yield their distinctive bouquet and flavor. The northern portion is the place for yielding this rare class of wine.

Rev. John Bleasdale, in a letter published in the Cornwall Chronicle on June 18, 1870, after time spent in George Town, northern Tasmania.

One of the frequently asked questions on Tasmania’s viticulture is, if it is proving so successful now, why didn’t it happen before? I think any practicing vigneron at this latitude knows the answer- because it is so difficult to get everything right all the time. Every season we have a new disease or problem achieving prominence, but fortunately the rewards are high for those who can overcome the obstacles and find the right answers.

Andrew Pirie - Vineyards Association of Tasmania Newsletter, May, 1988
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