

A SHORT REVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE FRANKSTON AMATEUR WINEMAKERS GUILD INC

Early in 1969 an advert appeared in the local papers. A winemaker from the Harrow Guild in London had recently immigrated and was keen to start a similar guild here.

His name was **Mick Armstrong**.

His enthusiasm was shown by the fact that he had emigrated with two single gallons of orange wine, still fermenting with air locks fitted – somehow for six weeks onboard ship. Imagine that nowadays!!

Two people answered the call – **Arthur Stone and Gordon Evans**, having never made wine before.

So the first steering committee was set up with the main aim of promoting the hobby and attracting members. Mick voted himself President, Gordon as Secretary and Arthur as Public Relations Officer.

Mick's enthusiasm was catching and in no time the main aims of the Guild were thrashed out. No doubt due to the help of orange wine. Meetings started at 7pm and rarely finished before midnight or 1 am. I don't think Arthur would mind me telling that he fell asleep (?) at one meeting and had to be taken home.

Membership climbed rapidly in spite of the fact that winemaking supplies were rarely available. Some ingredients were purchased from Boots the Chemist in England and often the only yeast available was for bread making.

Arthur's splendid effort in producing a handwritten monthly newsletter the "Grapevine", contributed greatly to this. In those days it was hand delivered. Postage was 7 cents!

Soon we began having meetings in members homes – a practice continuing for 30 years.

Unfettered by the regulations of the present, many decisions were made by a spin of the bottle. Outside activities were organised – picnics, shows, dances and car rallies. And ofcourse, competitions with our raw and un-tried wines. Winery visits were out, as there were none on the Peninsula.

The first division in the Guild showed in the coming year. Arthur who had carte blanche in promoting ideas and putting them into print, was often checked by the President, who insisted that they first be checked and modified by him. It reached a stage where Arthur felt gagged and the committee (then of five) had to decide if this was the way we wanted the Guild to run.

The decision was unanimous and Gordon had the odious task of informing Mick that if he couldn't change his attitude, a new president would be voted in. A very stubborn man – he wouldn't budge and he left the Guild which left a bitter taste. Without him there would have been no Guild. He was an excellent organiser and the only one with winemaking experience. So, it was sad to say, that within two years he died of cancer.

That left us without a president. So a special meeting was called, which took place at the Mechanics Hall. Explanations were given as to the reason and with no ceremony or constitution to abide by, a volunteer was requested from the audience (then numbering about two dozen).

One person put his hand up and to this day we don't quite know if he meant to ask a question or to go the toilet – but he was immediately voted in and remained President for the next 30 years.

His name was **John Lee** and he was attending his first meeting!

The Guild took a new turn. Most of us had young families, so began the days where we had holidays together.. Caravanning became most popular and all our Christmas and Easter holidays were taken together for the next 30 years without exception. This naturally lead to a close family bonding which can never be repeated and only fell apart due to the death of some members. We watched our children grow up and have children of their own. A bond which still exists .

Familiarity called for members to be given nicknames and examples of these are:-

John Lee	Mac Terrible
Gordon Evans	Himself
Arthur Stone	Afghan
Brian Francis	Midas
Rod Stokes	Camel Trader
Angus Harding	Mac Fungus
Marg & Nancy	The Ugly Sisters
Beryl Miller	The Great White Wale
Sylvia Evans	Welsh mountain pony
Barry Birchall	Noddy
Ian Hamilton	Mac Port
Fred Evans	Evans the Sewer
	Etc., etc.,

Too many camps to mention – each one precisely recorded by Kathe Stokes. We covered Victoria, NSW, Queensland, South Australia, ACT and Tasmania.. One year in an effort to find somewhere different, the committee took out a map of Victoria and, blindfolded, stuck a pin in it. It was Casterton near the SA border.

Our caravan train turned up at their information centre and asked for two weeks stay at the camping ground. Their reply was – “suggest you book for only one week – nobody stays for two”!!!!

However we did it for two and were invited into the homes of locals and even made it into the local newspaper. The bowls club tried to make us members.

Annual wine competitions were held and generally judged by two commercial judges – Robert Hicks and Maurice Hayes. Their comments and advice steered us into more efficient winemakers, to the extent we could hold our heads up at the ‘national’ in South Australia, Bega NSW, Seymour, Cairns and locally with the MADAWGs (Mountain and District Amateur Winemaking Guild) and Eltham Guild.

From our own ranks has emerged a judge to follow in their footsteps, **Chris Myers**, who leads in discussions and practical demonstrations.

Our membership remained stable at about 30. We never advertised for more, as the usual 20 that turned up for meetings was enough for the average home to accommodate.

The years rolled by. A constitution was formed and more recently (1990) Incorporation was required – which seemed to be the ending of the “free spirit” held before. With the passing of Kath Lee, Beryl Miller, Kathe Stokes, Kath Birchall, Ted Millar, Gerry Areas, Nancy Barker and recently John Lee, an era came to an end.

Gordon relinquished his post as Secretary after 29 years service. Arthur retained a position on the committee for over 30 years as Public Relations Officer, Editor and Cellarmaster for over 30 years.

Today the Guild has been transformed, with the ‘Old Brigade’ out and a new one in. It can never be the same, but the new committee and membership has infused new ideas that were greatly needed. Increased membership has been due to the introduction of winemaking courses and that necessitated meetings being held in various Community Halls.

A trend noticed developing has been the introduction of grape wines. This was never considered in the past, but it has extended the scope and skills of the Guild further. But the “oldies” view this with caution – as not to erode the basic tenets of the Guild – that of homemade fruit, vegetable, flower and herb wines.

The future of the Guild at the beginning of this century looks secure and in good hands.

May it build on a good foundation and may the younger winemakers ferment and develop as well as their wines.

Gordon Evans
Frankston 2006

Update 2016 by David Wood

“Ten Years On”

The guild membership has, at times, exceeded 100 members in recent years. We have been actively encouraging winemaking classes (in February each year) and have converted it into a hands-on experience with participants finishing the course with their first wine well underway. Participants also are provided with free membership of the guild up to the end of the financial year.

Meetings were moved from the Mornington Information Centre around 2008 to The Briars Park historic homestead in Mount Martha. However, after a number of years of happy use of this facility, the ‘economic rationalism’ and bureaucratic stance of MPSC resulted in us relocating to B’Darra Estate in Moorooduc. We meet in the disused tasting room, which is ‘cosy’ but adequate for our purposes.

A number of members of the guild continue to assist in the maintenance of the vineyard at The Briars, producing consistently good Cabernet Sauvignon wine from the grapes harvested. This has been a good opportunity for some members with limited land to achieve the grape growing and red wine making experience.

Our members continue to win medals at our show (in The Barn at The Briars), Australian National Wine and Beer Show (Adelaide), Australian Fruit Wine Show (Tasmania), Victorian Wine Show (grape wines only now), Eltham, Red Hill and Mansfield wine shows

Judges at shows have praised our ‘artisanal’ winemaking skills and have commented on the consistent high quality of wine produced. It has been particularly rewarding to see some of our newer members winning awards, not long after completing the winemaking course!

The guild website has been established www.fawg.org.au and is fully maintained by the guild, reducing maintenance costs and retaining control over the input. The site is kept as simple as possible