



My Vintage Year: An Interview Series

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

Luigi DiBattista

Today it is Luigi DiBattista and I have discovered, much to my delight that Luigi is engaging and very interesting. This surprises me because he was at Eltham Wine Guild during my time there also. But sometimes you need time to cultivate a friendship. He and I have had some discussion and we will follow up again when the Covid scourge is less of a problem. I think you will agree his interview is great. I did. And I can't wait to discover more about him.

Dave: Why wine and not beer.

Luigi: Actually, I do both but to my shame, I have never thrown away any of the beers I've made. Wine making is more challenging and after all these years I am still trying to achieve Gold. I enjoy the whole process of wine making from picking to crushing to pressing to maturation to discarding it. The later might involve pouring it down the sink or into the still or if I believe it is worthy of drinking, I will bottle it.

Dave: How did Wine Making as a hobby unfold. Has this been an easy path for you. What came first the Wine Guild or Wine Making.

Luigi: I come from a long line of wine makers from my dad, my uncles and grandparents. Everyone made wine in Italy. The vineyard was at the front door, and they would go out and do a

sample test of the baume by picking a few grapes and eating it. They would crush with the feet and wild yeast ferment. After two days of fermentation, they would press otherwise it would become too dark and heavy. Forty days after fermentation finished, they would transfer the wine and cap it in oak barrels that had seen better days fifty years prior. A thousand liters of wine was the average yield as it had to last until next vintage. The irony was the water from the well tasted better than the wine. When my family came to Australia, they brought their traditions with them and unfortunately, it included wine making. They all purchased new presses, the bigger the better. Crushing was still done by feet until Constante brought in the manual crusher. When one uncle bought one, every other family member had to have one. Not to be outdone, one family member electrified their crusher, electric motor, pulley, belt and no protective casing for safety measures because the extra time to fit one would be an overkill in the wine making process. It did not matter if fingers were lost as long as the wine got made.

As they progressed through the years, vintages were produced but variety was never changed. Sticking to traditions, what was outside their front door was the variety made. As this was not possible in the inner

suburbs of Fitzroy and Brunswick, Melbourne, Victoria Market played its part. Fifty boxes Shiraz, ten boxes of Cabernet and forty boxes of Waltham Cross because you don't want to make it too dark. With every Vintage and same variety came a different wine. Sometimes dark, sometimes light, sometimes sweet, sometimes dry, sometimes fizzy, sometimes volatile and sometimes vinegar. However, no one ever made a bad wine. Vinegar was an important staple in the Italian cuisine. One thousand liters meant a year's supply for the whole family, as well as neighbours and friends. To my surprise, none of my family ever distilled their wine but perhaps I should be grateful for that. Regardless, how my family lived into their eighties and nineties, I'll never know.

So, to answer the first part of your question, as I turned fifty, I could not understand why shop bought wines tasted better than my family's wine. There had to be a reason and that became my quest. So, to answer the last part of your question, I found and joined The Eltham and District Amateur Wine Guild. I purchased "Making Good Wine" by Bryce Rankine and called my "Compare Pat" who delivered eighteen boxes of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, from the Barossa Valley, and left them in the hot sun for a day.



In the mean time I had purchased a vat and 200lt variable capacity tank from WineQuip and hired the guild's Crusher De-stemmer. I came home from work that day and I was so happy that I would be making the next morning. I called my parents to let them know I was making wine by myself. They were surprised! Perhaps I should have involved them, but I didn't need their help.

The Crusher/De-stemmer was on a stand, the vat was in the cellar five meters away and I had buckets to transport the must. Regardless, I had dinner and eventually went to bed ready to start around 9am. After all, it was the weekend. The doorbell rang. I looked at the time. It was 6am! Put my robe on and answered the door. It was my parents ready to start making wine. They were surprised I was still in bed when it would take the entire day to crush the grapes. Perhaps they expected me to be traditional and use my feet. But I had tin-*ea*! Didn't think that was going to happen so I got up, got dressed, had breakfast and all under the gaze of my parent's eyes wanting me to hurry. 6.20am and I started to wash and sanitise the equipment, all the time being quizzed by my parents, why? 6.40am the crushing and de-stemming process began. 7.00am the crushing and de-stemming was complete. My parents stood around stunned. Delt with the must according to Rankine and by 7.30 the equipment was cleaned and washed. 7.35am said goodbye to the parents and went back to bed.

Had the whole year to deal with the wine and with the help of my friend Bryce, I made the best wine in the world. To celebrate an Orson Wells type success, I designed and got printed my own label detailing the vintage, style, bouquet, pallet and pairing of the magnificent wine. "Peachwood Rising" was the name of the wine and what I success it was. So, to finish answering the middle part of your question Dave, I loved it. What an achievement the year had been. A great wine and I was standing first on the podium. My family liked it. None had tasted such a wine. I was that proud that I entered it into the Elthem Wine Show and that's when I found out how good it was.

It Was Shit! Oxidised beyond drinkable!

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

Luigi: It was whilst living England in the early 80's. They had a chemist outlet called Boots and they sold wine making kits. Make wine in 6 weeks. Pour the contents into a gallon jug, add water and some yeast. What could possibly go wrong.

Dave: Did that immediately lead to your hobby of making wine.

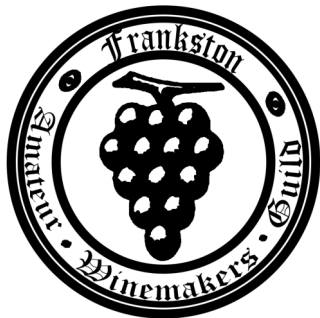
Luigi: No. I think it put me off wine-making. You see I bought a can, followed the instruction and sure enough, I had 6 bottles of wine in 6 weeks. So proud on my achievement that I took them to a party, tried a glass and preceded to drink some-

one else's wine. Dare I say it was not drinkable.

Dave: What is an interesting unknown fact about you that members of Frankston Guild may or may not find interesting.

Luigi: I love building! I finished off my own holiday house in Beech Forest, Ottway which included construction of a timber staircase.





Dave: If money was no object what wine or beverage would you purchase with these unlimited funds.

Luigi: Any 12 year old single malt whiskey and Pepperjack Shiraz.

Dave: What are you making now or have recently that you are most proud

Luigi: A Sauvignon Blanc and a Pinot, both started in 2021 and yet to be bottled.

Glen Fortune has a Presidents Question for you:

Question: Luigi knowing that you worked for Home make it and Bunnings what craft gives you the greatest pleasure?

Is it wine making, cheeses or Salami's or is there another talent you have that is your go to and why??

Luigi: Well, it is all of these. Wine making, salami, passata and distilling "water". I have started making cheese and sourdough bread. I do however love gardening, building, construction and home renovation, hence Bunnings, but I also want to start bee keeping in the next year. Retired and living on two acres can give me all these little hobbies in life.

Dave: Does technical astuteness give you an edge in your wine making skills. Wine making is skill that unfolds with experience. Are you

finding this to be true for you in your wine making.

Luigi: Wine testing at Home Make It has taught me a lot about wine making. Especially yeast and nutrient selection, and tannin additions. I would say that my wines have improved over the years, but I am also aware that my biggest downfall if in Sulphur additions, or lack of it and this has led to some lost wines through VA and oxidation.

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

Luigi: I think over the years that I have been a member of either Eltham or Frankston wine guilds, I have come to appreciate good wines. I enjoy trying to determine their composition of nose and palate. For me it has made me realise that I prefer big bold heavy wines, but I also have a weakness for a good Pinot.

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

Luigi: Got to admit, I tend to be more hap-hazard in my wine making while knowing full well I need to pay more attention to my wines.

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

Luigi: No, it's a hobby I'm afraid. I enjoy sharing my wines with family and friends, but I try not to obsess about it. If a wine does not work out, then into the still it goes. Failing that, turn it into a good vinegar.

Dave: What are you excited about for the future of home wine making. Where do you see it unfolding over the next ten years.

Luigi: I think yeasts and nutrients will continue to develop over the coming years. In ten years, we have come a long way from EC1118 and DAP with a lot more choice from the likes of Lavlin, Enartis for example to the point where yeasts and grape varieties go hand in hand. Wine additives will continue to develop. For example, Enartis make a product called Stab Micro and Stab Micro M for the prevention and reductions of volatile acidity.

However, I think the biggest change in the next 10 to 20 years will be in wine maturation vessels. With global warming upon us now and oak timber in high demand in the wine industry, the amateur wine maker has come to rely on demijohns, variable capacity tanks or fiberglass tanks with paraffin oil to stop oxidation. But all these have their issues as we know.

I think the next 10 years will see the introduction of amphora tanks for the amateur wine maker. With China now playing a large part in wine making, I see the manufacture and importation of amphora tanks at comparable prices with VC tanks.



Dave: What inspires you to make better wine. Is it the Gold medals or the knowledge that you are ever improving on your skill.

Luigi: Drinking it. While I occasionally put my wines into the wine shows, I do it to get professional feedback on my wines. Winning Gold does not inspire me, and I don't chase it. Knowing that a semi-professional or professional Vintner like my wine by giving me good written feedback is what drives me towards the next vintage. A bit like golf. You can have a awfully bad 17 holes and you look forward to the 19th hole to drown your sorrows with a few "good" wine. But then comes along a birdie or an eagle or an albatross on the 18th hole and you feel inspired to come back for a new game. That's me with wines.

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

Luigi: I have to say that two locals have inspired me in wine making. The first is David Hart. While I don't really know David, I have heard him talk at guild meetings and tasted his wines and I see the passion to continually strive to make good wines. That, I admire!
The other person is Danny Cappellani from the Eltham Guild. I have known Danny for several years, and he has helped me make and correct some of my wines. I have visited his wine making "shed" and was amazed at some of the equipment he used to make his wines. But it's like a Chinese kitchen in Beijing. It's not what the kitchen looks like, it's what is served out on the plate. I have al-

ways admired his passion and his pride in his wine making ability. I always thought he is a better vintner than some professional vintners.

Dave: Can you describe where you make your wine. Is it in your kitchen or do you have a dedicated area for wine making.

Luigi: Unfortunately, I all the years have been making wine, I have very few pictures as I'm not one to take selfies and never remember to get others to take one.

So, I'll get you to picture this scene. Think of a house on near the top of a hill with a carport to the right and a steep concrete driveway. It is not important what the house looks like but that you picture the carport. It has a wall at the back with a single roller door in the middle giving access to the back yard. Remember, it is near the top of a hill and when you stand looking away down the drive you see other houses, your neighbours! Remember this scene.

In the early days of wine making, this would be where I crushed and pressed my grapes. Neighbours would come round and ask what I was doing. They would be intrigued that I could turn, well, basically water into wine. We'd chat and I'd give them a sample of my previous wines and then they would leave, and I would continue working.

One day I started working at Home Make It. I Started as the manager and during the wine season, we would open seven days a week. So with little time and a strong urge to make wine, I would start after work,

usually a week night, washing and sterilizing my equipment, ready to crush by 9pm and be finished by midnight. The next big part of the process was pressing, and this had to be done and involved a lot more cleaning and sterilizing and I was usually ready to press by midnight. So, picture the carport again and now insert the click-click sound of the ratchet press and then hear and see those sound waves travelling from the top of the hill to my surrounding neighbours. I didn't get many neighbours coming to share the process but the next day while I was at work, my wife got a few visits from the neighbours. Only the mood was one of aggravation rather than anticipation of the next vintage. When I was home from work, my wife would comment, "that click-click noise travels far". To quote Forrest Gump, "and that's all I have to say on that".

I dug out my own cellar under the house, behind the carport. It had good access but had to be extended as I ran out of room to put all the wines I made. Literally, three sides were floor to ceiling wine racks I installed. It could hold roughly 600 bottles. This is where I would do my bottling. Set up a table and chairs, one bottle for me and the rest for the wine. They were good times but alas, all good things come to an end, so we sold up and moved to Bittern.

NOW I HAVE A ROOMY GARAGE AND STOREROOM TO MAKE AND STORE WINE! Emphasis on ROOM!

Dave: What have been the positive surprises of your membership of FAWG and how would you compare it to your experiences at EDWG.



Luigi: Vast difference between Eltham and Frankston Guilds. I like the fact that people bring their wines in at Eltham and everyone in the room can sample them while the owner is talking about the wine. Good way to get feedback on barrel samples. I think Frankston should adopt that. However, the turnout at Eltham has been dwindling over the years which is a shame.

Frankston on the other hand has a surprising turnout and given COVID, the first meeting of 2022 was very well represented.

Dave: What were you both drinking in your twenties.

Luigi: While I lived here, my drink was either cider or Southern Comfort. Hadn't met my wife then. When I was living in England mine was English beer but we both enjoyed a Blue Nun.

Dave: If you could tell the young Luigi about life, what advice would you give.

Luigi: Be more Italian. Make the salami, the wine, the passata, the cheese with the family. Don't leave these things to later in life.

Dave: What wine do you particularly enjoy making. Has the Guild turned out to be an ideal group either socially or for ideas for wine making.





Luigi: I am trying to make good Pinot. I am hoping that guild members can guide me on this. My aim is to make a kick-ass Pinot Noir that beats any pinot in the Yarra Valley, Mornington Peninsula and Bellarine Peninsula.

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

Luigi: I can turn a basic Can Sav into an exceptionally good Cab Sav by adding Enartis UNICO #1. The other is Elegance to help balance tannins and acid in wines. I use these all the time when Wine Testing at HMI.

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

Luigi: 2010. I tried to make a sweet wine. A sweet pear wine. So I got a bunch of pears, put them through the blender, just the pulp. I had already peeled and cored them first. Would want you think I was a complete novice. Added sugar to get it to about 13 baume and added EC1118 yeast with a little DAP.

It fermented dry, I added more sugar, It fermented dry, so, I added more sugar, It fermented dry, So, I added a heap more sugar, It fermented dry.

So, I bottled it and added a tablespoon of sugar to each bottle to make it sweet. Used normal wine bottles with twist caps.

Just left it there for 6 months.

I took a bottle in the kitchen to show my wife. Opened it and the wine hit

the ceiling. I tasted it, at least what was left. Half the bottle was all over the kitchen ceiling and floor so after a bid clean up, proceeded to sample the rest. Wasn't bad. I had made champagne. DRY champagne! I my have has a couple of large glasses. That night while sleeping, I woke to visit the bathroom and fell in a heap on the floor. My legs gave way as I suddenly remembered that basic rule of wine making, Yeasts just want to convert sugar into alcohol.

To this day I don't know how alcoholic that pear wine was, but I do remember it tasting very nice and the remaining 23 bottles of the wine was converted into 5 liters of 40% alcohol.

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.

Luigi: It is certainly cheaper to make homemade wines rather than buying commercial wines. I did some calculations a few years back and even after buying the equipment, grapes, additives, it costs about \$4-\$6 a bottle to make a bottle of homemade wine. Was this my motivation? No! It really was the idea of making a good wine people enjoy.

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.

Luigi: T-shirt, shorts and thongs. Billy Joel's Streetlife Serenade, Pepperjack Shiraz, "History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters" by Julian Barnes and a large bowl of Seafood Curry Laksa.