



## My Vintage Year: An Interview Series

**An interview series: 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**

Today it is Tim Donegan. I thought Tim was a quiet achiever but having visited his mini winery down the steep driveway, I'm not sure that applies to him now. As he describes, he has a hobby that grew out of control. Being the intelligent individual, going for broke is part of his dna. He was never going to be satisfied with equipment that was second best.

Tim has prodigious skills, he is analytical, careful and considered with his approach to wine making. Most of you know this already and those that don't will, after this interview, be wiser to this fact. I found the interview fascinating and so will you. And yes I agree with his opinion on Van.

**Dave: Why wine and not beer.**

Tim: I love a nice beer but I find wine far more intriguing.

**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.**

Tim: I've always had an interest in wine but it wasn't until I came to Australia that the winemaking became a possibility. My wife's family made rustic Italian wine and that for me was the catalyst. I enjoyed helping out with the winemaking but was also exposed to friends who were in the wine industry. The combination of both experiences was the driver for

pursuing winemaking knowledge through formal training. The chance to benchmark my wines through the amateur shows and more importantly get feedback was a great opportunity for someone making wine in isolation. The silver-tongued Peter Ennis suggested I join FAWG and let's be honest, there's not many people that can say no to Peter so I did join but the hobby came before the wine guild.

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

Tim: Although I had been exposed to wine at home (unusual for an Irish family at the time) It wasn't until I was working for a corporate entertainment company in London during the 80's that my curiosity was aroused. I found myself having to manage bar stock orders and grappled with the variety of wines and styles (apparently there is more than just one white wine) so I figured I needed to a bit of research and boy, did that open Pandora's box!

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

Tim: No, it was a slow burn from there and to be honest it was hampered by the lack of opportunity to make wine in the UK. At the time, no one would have predicted that grape

wine making in the UK would be a thing. That said, I recall paying a number of visits to a country Winery just outside London where elderflower wine, gooseberry sparkling, strawberry wine and plum brandy were stand outs.

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

Tim: I lived on house boats on the Thames River for seven years before my wife brought me back to Australia, a souvenir of her European trip.

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

Tim: I'm a self-confessed Pinotophile so it would have to be DRC (Domaine de la Romanée-Conti) just to see what all the fuss was about. To be honest, as passionate as I am about wine, I don't think I could tell the difference between a \$150 wine and a \$3,500 wine. There's a point beyond which it ceases to be value for money. I'd rather buy one of the Bittern by the Grape wines and put the rest of the money to better use. Sorry, I'll get off my hobby horse ;)



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

**Tim:** having had to source red grapes elsewhere after Camelback vineyard let me down at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, it would have to be my 2021 GSM. It was awarded a Gold at the Eltham show and a HC at the FAWG show and has proved extremely popular with family, friends and even a wine bar in the city.

**Glen Fortune has a Presidents Question for you:**

**Question:** After working with you on the Riesling Focus Group, I couldn't help but be impressed by what you achieve in such a small space. It appears to me you are one of those people who knows how to solve a

problem.  
My question to you is. Have you ever had a problem in winemaking that you have not been able to solve.?

**Tim:** I'm always coming across problems in wine making and if it's a practical problem I can usually figure out a pragmatic workaround. However, if it's a technical problem, I usually take one of the following courses of action:

1. Phone a friend or in our case speak to members of the guild. There's a wealth of knowledge and experience that can be tapped into. After all, we're in the guild to learn from each other.
2. Wait it out. Sometimes wine faults are a temporary phase and I have learnt to avoid knee jerk reactions.
3. If I can't figure out what the prob-

lem is, I will get the wine professionally tested/analysed and seek guidance, particularly in wine chemistry matters.

4. Throw in the towel, pour the wine down the drain and try again next year. There is no coming back from some problems.

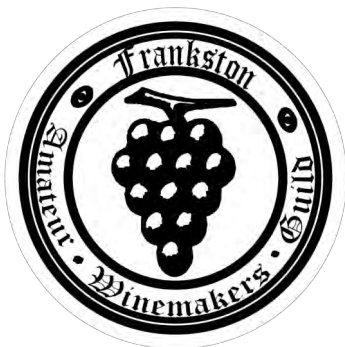
With the 'off' taste in my 2021 Pinot, I had the free SO<sub>2</sub> tested at the guild and got a negative reading. I sulphured it up again and kept it in a cool environment under CO<sub>2</sub> cover. If it doesn't come good, I'll consider getting it distilled or make red wine vinegar (away from my other wines).

I try to think laterally when problems present, As they say, "Necessity is the mother of all invention".

**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.

**Tim:** Absolutely, after all, wine is a chemical soup that is constantly changing and having the technical astuteness to stay ahead of the curve is a huge advantage as it allows you to be proactive rather than reactive.. Sadly its an area that is not my strong suit. In answer to the old question of whether winemaking is a black art or a science, the LAS label of a winery in WA sums it up perfectly as Luck, Art and Science. My advice for those of us in the guild that have made wines for a number of years is that you should trust your intuition - we may not be able to articulate why we make certain wine-making choices but we should never underestimate how much knowledge we have picked up through osmosis from attending guild meetings, shared experiences with peers, curiosity, etc





interests outside the guild but love that we share knowledge and learn from each other on our wine journey through FAWG.

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

Tim: I'm excited about the increase in the standard of winemaking year on year. Through the shows, there is a real opportunity to gain greater exposure for amateur winemaking and demonstrating that not all good wines are made by big commercial wineries. We need to find a way of getting more young guns involved.

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

Tim: My goal is for incremental improvements in winemaking year on year. The show system is a way of benchmarking how I'm tracking with that. Sometimes we have to take one step back in order to take two steps forward but as long as I'm on an upward trajectory, then I'm a happy little vegemite

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

Tim: I love Dave Hart's pursuit of perfection, his appetite for wine knowledge and his willingness to share that knowledge with people who are keen to learn.

**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.**

Tim: Yes, I find myself getting into that side of things more and more; how could you not? Of all the alcoholic beverages, wine has got to be the most thought provoking. Wine is a living thing and has a story to tell to those who are prepared to listen. I love the idea of drinking mindfully.

**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.**

Tim: I'm a bit of both really. Previous stuff ups have taught me that there are enough things that are out of our control so I have learned to judiciously manage those elements that we have control over. If you don't believe that your best wine is your next wine then I'd recommend stamp collecting as a more suitable hobby.

**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.**

Tim: 100%. I consider myself as a wine lover first and a winemaker second. Anyone who claims to know everything about wine is kidding themselves. I have a number of wine



**Dave:** What were you drinking in your twenties.

**Tim:** As a general rule, anything wet and alcoholic if I'm being honest. As far as wines are concerned, Riesling, Lambrusco, Frascati, Hungarian Bulls Blood wine and I had a huge soft spot for St Emilion.

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

**Tim:** That's an easy one... Study Viticulture & winemaking - it's your passport to traveling by working vintages all over the world

**Tim:** There have been a few. An infected barrel and lack of attention pretty much wrote of a stunning Pinot Noir in 2020. On more than one occasion, I have incorrectly calculated additions. It's amazing what one decimal point can make - measure twice, cut once.

**Dave:** I have asked this question of everyone. 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.

**Tim:**

I get a lot of satisfaction in seeing friends and family enjoying my wine.

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

**Tim:** This is where a hobby can become an obsession. I have a large shed for winemaking and I have accumulated enough winemaking equipment over the years to be self-sufficient. I built a small cool room (2.5m x 2.5m) that allows me to make white and sparkling wine. I will never recover the financial outlay but what price do you put on the things that make you happy?

**Dave:** What have been the positive surprises of your membership of FAWG.

**Tim:** I don't there have been any real surprises but if I was to pick one thing it would be the opportunity to access and learn from the focus groups.

**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.

**Tim:** I did my first traditional method sparkling with a small focus group from the guild. I have gone on to make a blanc de blanc every year since and I don't think I would have done that on my own.

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

**Tim:** Less is more. I try to follow a philosophy of minimal intervention as possible. David Harts tip for adding a mega dose of PMS after fermentation has allowed a safe environment in which to do so.

**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.

### 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.

**Tim:** Van Morrison, "Poetic Champions Compose", a Sardinian Vermen-tino, Spaghetti Vongole and a copy of James Halliday's Wine Odyssey, *A year of wine, food and travel*