

## My Vintage Year:

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 Mike Payne:

I first met Mike Payne at Dave Hart's place at a BBQ. On the day I was excited to meet up with David & Kerrie again and visit their new home in



Hastings. I was very impressed with what a lovely home it is. David has set up for wine making in a smaller way with a cool room and room to process a vintage or three. He has an alfresco area including bbq and outdoor kitchen. Perfect for entertaining his many friends. I must ask him if we can do a small guild function there before the weather gets cold.

But today is about Mike and not David. However not knowing Mike, I asked David to give me some stuff about him. Relax Mike it's all good. David has known Mike for about 15 years. He finds his company engaging and they are good friends. Sharing the winemakers cunning and wit as they share barbs about each other's skill in the vineyard and all things wine. Mike, David tells me, originally set up for sparkling wine. Although he believes nowadays he makes a barrel to Pinot every couple of years and apparently Chardonnay every two or three years using a contract winemaker named Ewan, at Phaedrus Estate here on the peninsula. Mike has qualifications in Viticulture and was

involved in setting up another Vineyard before his current one. Mike as everyone knows, has a quality product. Mike takes great care and attention to provide the best grapes he can. The following interview will give an insight as to why.

### Dave: Why wine and not beer.

Mike: As a young adult experimenting with different drinks, as we all did, there were only a handful of beers around and wine offered much more scope, so that's the way I went.

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

Mike: It was very much a progression. Firstly, learning about wine in general and then moved on to wine making as a hobby to see how the stuff was made. Finally, it became obvious that wine was only as good as the base product, so there was much more to learn about grapes and grape growing.

### Dave: What is your first experience that you remember that led to an interest in wine and did that immediately lead to your hobby/business of growing grapes.

Mike: I was in my early 20's and was trying to impress a particular young lady and was absolutely terrified that a wine menu may be thrust upon me in a restaurant and I would be asked to select the appropriate wine. This was the beginning of the thirst for knowledge!

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

**Mike:** I arrived with my family from the UK in 1960 and not knowing what I wanted to do with my life, I set about learning as many skills and trades as possible, which eventually held me in good stead for managing a small property, without too much input from others.



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

**Mike:** A bunch of fine French Burgundy's come to mind but, as my wife does not drink red wine, I would tend towards purchasing some fine wine from my next best favourite using Chardonnay and Pinot, Champagne of course. Maybe some Bollinger RD, Perrier Jouet or Crystal.

**Dave:** What are you making now or made in the distant past, that you are most proud.

**Mike:** Over the last 20 odd years I have become more involved in grape growing and less involved with making wine, but I do remember making some pretty good sparkling whites that I was happy with.

**Glen Fortune has a Presidents Question for**

**you:**

Mike with the set up you have in Hastings. You grow your grapes and are organised better than anybody I know. What is your history, and why grow Pinot and Chardonnay Grapes.

**Mike:** A bit like the duck swimming upstream Glen, all calm and collected above water and going like hell in total disarray underneath.

With regards to the grape varieties, I had seen many others around the area growing varieties, not particularly suited to their site and so, tried to choose specific clones of Pinot, Chardonnay and Pinot Gris that would hopefully provide us with the best quality fruit possible.

**Dave:** Does technical astuteness give you an edge in your grape growing skills. Growing grapes is a skill that unfolds, however it is fraught with variables like the weather. How are you able to navigate all the problems that can befall a vigneron.

**Mike:** It's all about learning and experimentation and can be very site specific. Lots of research, hands on wine growing courses and trying all sorts of different things to sort out what works for you. The weather is always going to be a variable that you cannot control, so being on

guard and having the appropriate materials on hand and an action plan is very important.

**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 you.

**Mike:** I certainly don't consider myself a wine snob and as long as a wine is not full of faults, it will always bring me pleasure no matter what it is.

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

**Mike:** I may be considered pedantic by many, (this may be an understatement), but my aim is simple and is to do whatever is required to ensure the best fruit possible is produced from whatever conditions and situations are thrown my way.

**Dave:** What is being a vigneron to you. Is it a consuming passion that excites you, daily

**Mike:** Sometimes during the busy periods, I think the vineyard is consuming me but, for most of the time it is the one thing that keeps me going and all I want to do is constantly make adjustments and improvements that will result in better fruit.

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

**Mike:** I find the fact that we are now beginning to use a little bit of science to match site selection with grape varieties and clonal selection it is becoming exciting. Also, not being afraid to experiment with different varieties has to be a plus.

**Dave:** Who or what has been your biggest influence in grape growing.

**Mike:** I have been influenced by many people along the journey but the stand outs would have to be spending time with Dr Richard Smart, (viticultural consultant and educator) and also a couple of lecturers from the Charles Sturt Uni

course.

**Dave:** I understand you have someone make your wine now. Have you been tempted to try it again yourself.

**Mike:** Yes, I certainly hope to get back to it. It's just a time thing to do both growing and making properly. I originally planted just two rows of Pinot Gris for that very reason but am still trying to get back to it, (for 20 years now those wine guild members keep taking it and it's hard to say no).

**Dave:** Where in the world is your favourite grape growing area. And what do they grow.

**Mike:** This is a difficult question as there are so many fantastic and challenging grape growing areas. Apart from the obvious, Mornington Peninsula, it would have to be a cool climate site and most likely in Australia, as we have so much freedom with what we can grow. Versatile varieties such as Chardonnay are always going to be a winner.

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

**Mike:** Anything and everything. Mainly sweet stuff due to the untrained palate.

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

**Mike:** You shouldn't always wait until its safe before you make a big change. Sometimes you should bite the bullet and go for it while you are still young.

**Dave:** What wine grapes would you plant given your time again twenty years ago.

**Mike:** Probably the same ones we are currently growing but with much more thought and planning with regards to clonal selection and the proportions of each.

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



**Mike:** Firstly, **don't be afraid to experiment**, be it pruning, trellising, soil and site care, or disease prevention. Secondly, **don't be afraid to experiment**, particularly with the way that you go about completing the tasks in the vineyard by trying to make it easier on yourself.

**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 that involved growing grapes.

**Mike:** Two disasters come to mind. The first was the best wine I have ever made, which was a fortified port style made from Mataro. I pushed the bung in to the glass demijohn way too hard and as it warmed up, it cracked of course and left a stream of red wine all the way down the driveway.

The second, was in the vineyard when my dear neighbour decided to spray the fence line with Glyphosate herbicide and quite a few vines took on rather a strange appearance before losing their leaves prematurely.

**Dave:** I have asked this question of everyone. So far, a hundred percent have said that growing grapes and making wine was never a financial

consideration. What was the motivation and still is for you after so many years.

**Mike:** Hobbies seldom pay for themselves and this is no different. We try to manage every task in the vineyard without external help and sometimes this requires some creative engineering, procurement of equipment or just finding better ways of doing things. This in itself is motivating.

### And Finally

**Dave:** You are visiting 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 and declared at immigration when you enter the Republic of Maldives on your way to the Baa Atoll.

**Mike:** The old desert island question! The wine, preferably a magnum, would have to be a fortified like a port in the warm climate to reduce the chance of spoilage and allow me a wee sip every day. Maybe some reggae music to suit the atmosphere and of course some fine cheese to go with the port.

