

## My Vintage Year: Jen Pfeiffer

An interview series: Where we interview wine people. They may be your fellow Guild members or significant others. WAS THIS THEIR VINTAGE YEAR: by Dave Chambers

Today it is Jen Pfeiffer. And I am so grateful that out of her busy day she has found time to indulge us with her story, so far.

What does it take to make a good wine? We know good grapes, equals good wine, mostly. But I suggest there are other influences. Were you, like me, charmed by the love and respect between Jen and her father Chris during Eltham's Guild's recent Muscat Masterclass. What percentage does family, tradition and hard work contribute? Is it more likely a product of all off these? While Pfeiffer's Winery doesn't have the hundred years plus tradition of some Rutherglen Wineries, although, it does seem embedded in my mind that this history has always seemed so. It is a family of Wine Makers that well and truly has become part of that Rutherglen story. Pfeiffer's Winery fills a space amongst the established elite.

I have had a lifelong association and obsession with Rutherglen. Why wouldn't you love a town with so much history? If you squeeze the history of this town many characters pop out. And we are so lucky to have these families that have become the true wine making legends of this town.

One of those families becoming part of this legend, The Pfeiffer Family, is making big waves in the wine world. Jen Pfeiffer is a wine maker and an incredibly talented one she is. As you will read below, her rise through wine making to where she is today is due to hard work and commitment to excellence. She loves what she does. Jen was always going to make big waves in the wine industry. I think that maybe some may think she has achieved quite a lot already. I do. But watch this space.

Dave: You would have had an ideal childhood being raised at a property located on a vineyard in such an historic spot. What are your earliest fond memories of that time?

Jen: I had a great childhood around the winery. My sister and I used to catch the school bus to and from school, and I remember getting off the bus, grabbing our bikes, reporting in to Mum at the cellar door, then heading out to the vineyard to find Dad and ride around the vineyard. I spent many days playing hide and seek in the cellar with our visiting cousins, at which stage I also learnt how to climb on the big old casks that contain our wonderful old fortified wines.



Being reasonably entrepreneurial from an early age, I set up shop out the front of the cellar door and would draw portraits of our customers, and then sell them to them for 20c each. I would collect the pine nuts from the big pine trees at the front of the cellar door, jar them up and sell them as well.

It wasn't long before I was behind the counter in cellar door!

Dave: I understand there is a closeness, a bond if you like with others of your generation from wine families, raised amongst the old river gums of Wahgunyah and Rutherglen. Is this true?

Jen: Rutherglen is a small and tight-knit wine community. I grew up being babysat by the Campbell and Gehrig families, I then spent my teenage years babysitting the Killeen kids. Knowing each other for such a long time gives us such a unique connection and relationship, it's not just business, it's friendship.

I truly believe it is through our ability to work and support each other that allows Rutherglen to punch well above our weight in terms of our presence in the industry and quality of our wines.

Dave: What is your first experience that you remember that led to an interest in wine? Was this always the path for you after your formal education?

Jen: When I was a little girl, I used to say "when I grow up, I want to be the best winemaker in the whole, wide world....just like my Dad!". I always had an interest in the family business and winemaking, but did veer off the path as a teenager and young adult, studying Science/Law at university. It was when I returned home from university to complete the 2000 vintage and earn some cash to travel overseas that I actually really caught the winemaking bug and the rest is history as they say!

Dave: At what age did your parents allow you to make your first batches of wine?

Jen: I was always allowed to help around the winery, but the very first wine I made was the Pfeiffer Shiraz 2000 (my first vintage back home), which went on to win a gold medal and further solidified my interest in winemaking.

Dave: You have developed your own label Rock It Like a Redhead; has this been fulfilling for you? And how much significance did it make hooking up with Naked Wines?

Jen: Developing the Rock It Like A Redhead label has been very fulfilling for me. It's been an amazing journey to see my brand grow alongside the Naked Wines brand, and introduce my wines to so many people (in Australia, the US and the UK) who may not have heard of Pfeiffer Wines, or even Rutherglen.

Dave: There are many occasions to party when your parents own a vineyard. Can you tell us about the wildest party you attended.? Probably in your youth but maybe not.

Jen: I had a big bash to celebrate my 33 1/3 birthday – with 66 guests, live music, food and wine and lots of tom-foolery. It was on our famous Pfeiffer Sunday Creek bridge and while we didn't run out of wine, we

sure gave it a try!!!!

Dave: What are you making now that excites you?

Jen: Lots of things! All of the fortified styles we make always have and always will excite me. To be able to make wines of that quality that are so highly regarded both in Australia and internationally is a big thrill.

I am also loving making Tempranillo - learning more about the variety with each year I make it; our very special old vine Pinot Noir (planted in 1961-62, with a genetic lineage that goes back to the grand cru Clos de Vougeot vineyard in Burgundy); all our Portuguese varieties and another Rutherglen classic, Durif.

### **Graham Scott has a Guest Question for you:**

Graham Question: I know you have a set regime for making your muscat every year. But there are differences in climate and growing every year. How do you maintain consistency over all those years?

Jen: Great question. I do have a set regime for making our Muscat every year, but perhaps not in the way you are thinking.

Every year, we assess every single Muscat barrel in the solera (all 600 of them!). They are sampled, tasted, analysed and sulphur adjusted at this time. This is also when I determine the new blends - both the commercial blends of the Rutherglen, Classic, Grand and Rare, but also the maturation blends (combining parcels where the sum is better than the parts to then return to wood for further maturation).

I also top my barrels at this stage (generally using one barrel from a batch to top all the other barrels in that batch).

These are the tasks that I like to perform annually to maintain the quality of the wines maturing in our solera, and this the quality of the commercial blends too.

In terms of production techniques, I am far more reactive to the season. Yes, I am targeting a high baumé at harvest, and yes, the wine will be fortified to around 17.5%, but picking decisions, time on skins, cold soaking and fermentation decisions are all based around what the season throws at us. For example, in a cool, dry year, I'll leave the fruit to hang on the vine, developing flavour and concentration slowly, then follow it with a cold soak, then fermentation and up to 7 days on skins. In a wet year, I may be forced to pick the fruit around 15-16be, then give a very quick ferment and off skins in 3 days. It all depends what the fruit is telling me.



Consistency is so important in fortified wines, but I think the best way to achieve that is to react to the fruit in front of me, and try to make the best wine I can using a number of techniques rather than doing the same thing year on year, regardless of the season. I then rely on my skill as a blender to draw the appropriate parcels from the solera for the appropriate blend (not a traditional solera method).

In my mind, I can achieve the best result from both a consistency and a quality perspective.

Dave: How much of your wine making skills do you attribute to your early years growing up in the vineyard? Do you think this has helped you make more interesting wine?

Jen: Absolutely!!! I think when you grow up in a wine family, you learn a second language....the language of wine. Straight away, it is an advantage, I think, being exposed to some of the greats of our industry and listening to conversations about wine from a very young age helps to form ideas and opinions later in life.

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?

Jen: It depends on the company!!! I love being around fellow industry professionals, or highly engaged wine consumers and having intelligent discussion on winemaking, wine politics and the future of our industry. I am equally as happy to just enjoy the fellowship that wine brings through social occasions where wine is not taken so seriously.

For me, wine gives me the opportunity to push myself to try to improve year on year in my winemaking skills, which is what I love most!

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

Jen: I am definitely a pedantic winemaker – I believe all great winemakers need to have great attention to detail. That starts in the vineyard, extends to the winemaking and finishes with the way we present our wines to our customers.

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

Jen: Winemaking represents my family, my home, my region and my life.

Dave: What are you excited about for the future of wine making in Australia?

Jen: Climate change has definitely seen us looking towards sustainability within our industry and the move to regenerative agriculture and sustainable practices in all aspects of our industry. I think there are huge benefits to be gained for the quality of our wines in Australia.

At Pfeiffer Wines, we have utilized sustainable practices for some time, such as recycling our winery wastewater and creating mulch and compost from our grape marc and vineyard cuttings. We are looking to continue such practices and develop more, which I believe will help us continue in our quest for quality.

Dave: What inspires you to make better wine? Is it the Gold medals or the knowledge that you are ever improving on your skills from those acquired accolades?

Jen: I am a highly motivated person, with a mission to be the best I can be. Receiving accolades is not about the medals themselves, but the acknowledgment from our peers that we are achieving some of our goals in terms of our quality focus.

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

Jen: My Dad, Chris. I wouldn't be where I am today without his help and guidance.



Dave: What wine that you have made recently are you most proud of?

Jen: I made a couple of outstanding Vintage Fortifieds in 2018. The Pfeiffer Christopher's VP 2018 is perhaps the best VP I have made in my career thus far, and drew on all my experience from my vintages in the Douro Valley, Portugal and in Rutherglen to create such a magnificent wine. I also made my Fascination Vintage Fortified 2018 for my Rock It Like A Redhead brand, which I challenged myself to make in a very different style to the Pfeiffer, being bigger, bolder and more obviously powerful. This was a cracking example as well and I feel so proud to be able to show the wines side by side, both showing incredible quality, but being very different wines.

Dave: What have been the positive surprises of making wine for Naked Wines?

Jen: Naked have created a wonderful community of winemakers and wine drinkers. It's the connection that I get to share with the Angels (the members) that I have really enjoyed. I have made so many friends with both winemakers and Angels alike – that has been the highlight for me.

Dave: What were you drinking in your twenties?

Jen: Riesling and Gin (not together).

Dave: If you could tell the young Jen about life, what advice would you give?

Jen: Try to stay out of trouble!!!

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

Jen: I love finishing tannins as a final addition in red wines – I use a grape seed tannin, in incredibly small quantities that I love from a textural and structural point of view.

My other favourite wine tweak is blending. Blending is our best tool to achieve overall wine balance – this is epitomised with our fortifieds, but is true of all wine.

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

Jen: I drove our forklift into the Grape Receiving Bin in 2003 – with 20 tonnes of Muscat still to crush that afternoon! Lucky we had a good engineer to call on!

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 in family wine making?

Jen: The pursuit of quality has always been and I hope will always be my priority. However, I also have a strong desire to represent my family, my region and my industry to the best of my ability.

### **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.

Jen: David Bowie – Station to Station (music)

Croft 2007 Vintage Port (the year I worked there and was so inspired by David Guimaraens)

Dark Chocolate (to go with the port)

Geoffrey Blainey's A Short History of the World

[www.pfeifferwinesrutherglen.com.au](http://www.pfeifferwinesrutherglen.com.au)

