

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 Rob Gherardi. Rob is the Wine Maker and owner of Mr Barval Fine Wines in Margaret River. You may ask why we are doing an interview with a wine maker. Yes, we have done this before with some notables, but Rob as you will see is different to your usual wine maker. He is our first from WA and consequently our first from Margaret River, or Margs as pronounced by the locals. He has a focus on tradition while at the same time encompassing those variables that make fine wine. Those are time, both at picking and in the winery, terroir, climate, and grape varieties suited to your area. Climate change features in this and Rob is excited about the prospect and challenge of new grape varieties that will benefit his unique location on Caves Road in Margaret River.

But spare a thought for him, he is doing it tough. Rob is doing what he loves in gods own country on the coast of WA, in Margaret River, and as if this wasn't enough fun he then leads his wine tour business, called 'Taste of Life Tours' which takes him yearly to North West Italy, to tour the famed wine country of Barolo and Barbaresco in Piemonte. The tour takes in the rolling, vine clad slopes and picturesque hilltop towns of the Langhe that is home to the two most sought after of Italian fine wines and the centre of one of Europe's most renowned wine and food cultures. It is a true eno-

gastronomic paradise set amongst centuries old cobble-stoned villages. Booked out yearly be quick for the next one.

I spent an entertaining hour or so listening to Rob's story. He is much more than a wine maker of note and that part of his character is very interesting indeed. But it is about the wine for you and me. So do yourself a real favour by ordering from Mr Barval Wines and trying for yourself one of Marg's best boutique wineries.



And what about the name, Mr Barval Fine Wines. The name, Margaret River, is the Mr, part, then add Bar for Barolo and val for Valtellina, together they become Mr Barval, clever huh.

Dave: Could it ever have been beer and not wine.

Rob: Yes, it could easily have been beer making, especially here in Australia. A favourite saying, of mine I can share with you is. 'It takes a lot of beer to make good wine.' Every winery I have ever worked in Australia has a beer frig, some even have them in the bottling room as well as the office.

Dave: How did Wine Making unfold for you. Has this been an easy path for you.

Rob: I was doing a degree in Biotechnology and Marine Science and thinking perhaps this is not for me. Continued with it for a while girlfriends happened, suddenly a career became more important. A girlfriend became a wife, then it became even more important. We visited some friends in Margaret River in my early 20's this was a real treat. Because I then enrolled in Curtin University for Bachelor of Wine Science

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

Rob: Wine and its traditions have always been part of my family having both an Italian and an Australian heritage

Dave: Did that immediately lead to your career of making wine

Rob: No but it was not long before it became clear to me that after working with Cullen's Winery and Moss Wood that it may be possible to carve out something in life that may be rewarding financially and spiritually.

Dave: What is an interesting unknown fact about you that readers may or may not find interesting.

Rob: I almost became a Chef and still now really enjoy tossing pans around the kitchen.

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

Rob: My absolute favourite wines come from Borololo. Anything from there is superb.

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

Rob: The Cabernet Sauvignon's and Chardonnay's have a style from Margs that I love and we are really proud of what we have achieved so far with these varieties. We are also developing an interesting Rhone White style using Viognier and Marsanne that we will be releasing soon.

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.

Rob: It's a fine balance of getting both right the wine science and training. There is a bit of a vibe about changing the right grapes for the right growing areas and calling it out with the knowledge that your wine career training and experience learnt in the vineyard.

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.

Rob: I know what I like and pursue that with a passion and I can be as technical as the next wine maker about all things wine.

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

Rob: As I said earlier it is about timing. Both in the vineyard and in winery. Being a relatively small winery, we have the advantage of a hands-on approach that larger wineries aren't able to achieve with their economies of scale.

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

Rob: I am really lucky, I pinch myself sometimes, when I think that I am doing something I love in an area of the world that excites me daily in a country I love. The fact that I can share this with my family motivates me always.

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

Rob: Climate change has had an impact on growing conditions throughout the world and I am excited that this presents us with a lot of opportunities to plant new varieties. But having said that we are in an area where it is considered may not be so impacted by weather patterns. But I can't wait to plant new varieties that will thrive in this climate at Margs.

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



Rob: We don't enter wine shows. We have presented wines to reviewers with considerable success. But we are lucky to sell out regularly. And that is all the proof I need of improving my skills as a wine maker.

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

Rob: Vanya Cullen at Cullen Wines and Keith Mugford at Moss Wood Wines. But I must preface this with my number one influence in Italy. I spent a number of years in Barolo making wine with Elio Altare. There is a documentary called the 'Barolo Boys' that I recommend people watch. This



experience in Barolo motivates me to make better wine in Margs.

Dave: What were you drinking in your twenties.

Rob: Happs, Fuchsia Rosé a slightly sweet style of wine when I lived in Exmouth, WA. I was also into Cabernet's and big bold Shiraz.

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

Rob: Use your head more and follow your heart.

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

Rob: I don't really have any tweaks as such. But for me timing is so important through every stage.

Temperature during the ferment. Positioning the right buds on the vine for growth. Something for us as a boutique winery we find produces great results.

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.

Rob: I have been lucky so far, touch wood. No disasters yet.



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.

Rob: Easy the books are 'The Hobbit', 'Lord of the Rings' Tolkien is a hero of mine. The music is anything by the 'Violent Femmes', a Barolo to drink and Pasta would fix me up nicely.

