

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 Steve Brown. And what an interesting character he is. I don't know a lot about Steve, yet. I am very interested in following up having read his very interesting My Vintage Year details about his Wine Making journey. I became more interested in Steve's skills after reading his posts on our Riesling Focus Group. I encourage anyone not yet indulged to join one of these. It has been a lot of fun, rewarding us with more details than you can poke a stick at. The more interesting stuff out of this focus group will be comparing the wines. I expect Steve's will be very good indeed. He knows his stuff.

Dave: Why wine and not beer.

Steve: Initially it was beer. I made kit beer in my 20s though mostly stout because it wasn't biased by my then (commercial) beer tastes. I still love stouts - Guinness is great, but locally Hickinbotham's stout is very drinkable. But in my 40s I joined a social wine club at my workplace - more for the 'social' & I asked them to get some beer in too as I didn't like wines that much. After about 3 months, I still recall watching TV one night & a thought popped into my head - wouldn't mind a red wine - & that was the start.

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.

Steve: Well, after getting the 'taste', I thought with my stout making experience I'd try a wine (we lived in Cheltenham at the time). Completely in the dark, I bought a box of red table grapes from Vic Market & proceeded as I would with beer (read this as no open ferment). After 2 weeks I had 20L of whiffy (H₂S) must that I fed to my garden. I bought a DPI book 'Wine From 100 Vines' that promoted growing vines in your backyard & showing how to make into wine - from there I decided I'd grow & make reds, but not in Cheltenham because our yard was too shaded.

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

Steve: This goes way back - when I was about 14yo I used to read my dad's Post magazine (purely for the articles....). One issue talked about people home-making fruit wines. With the little info they gave, I bought many tins of pineapple juice & got dad to 'borrow' a ~30L milk keg from the sterilizing line at Woodruff Dairies - I fermented with the lid on the keg & if I recall right it ended up like pineapple vinegar that I used to clear the gully trap at our Port Melb home.

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

Steve: Not really. I gave up on wine-making & made stout regularly in my

20s, but once I got the taste for reds in my 40s I got more serious & looked into dropping out of my work at CSIRO & starting a vineyard. At a couple of seminars, I found that it was long-term prospect that my granddad should've started & once I found 'Wine From 100 Vines' becoming a small producer became my aim (I had no idea of FAWG). I semi-retired from CSIRO when I was 55yo & soon after we bought our 2/3 acre block on Hill Martha. Initially I'd come down & slash the block etc & one day coming past the Briars I saw signs on the Highway for FAWG's wine show (about 2007) the next week. I made sure I got to the show & decided I'd be joining once we moved to Mt Martha (in 2008).





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

Steve: I'm an industrial/environmental chemist with a PhD in air quality & have published about 120 papers, & use virtually none of this in the dark art of wine-making, and don't want to. Totally different - I've run the Frankston-Melb marathon twice (in my 30s) & wish I could still distance run (it's like mobile meditation) but my 71yo frame tells me I'm an idiot. I was also a mad windsurfer down at Torquay, & still have my equipment & each year think 'I'll try sailing this year', but then something gives & it doesn't happen.

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

Steve: I've tried a couple of Grange & Hill of Grace & other ex\$ wines at tastings so for me it's not a money thing that I'd not go for these. I like the surprise that some out of the way wines bring. Some gold medal wines, FAWG or commercial, just make your palate sing. One of my big surprises in the 1990s was Booth's Tamnick wines at Glenrowan - big reds, great fruit & tannins, yum yum - if I'm driving up Hume Hwy I'll usually stop & get a few dozen Shiraz or CabSav. Some who drank Booth's wine in the 1980s said they were sometimes terrible (I tried a 1988 Shiraz & it was cough medicine & was told that's how it was at start).

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

Steve: I grow mostly Shiraz (100 vines), but have small(er) pockets of CabSav, Durif, PinotNoir. I put in this variety because 13y ago I had no idea how they'd go a MtMartha. In 2021 I got gold & an award for my 2020 PinotN - I don't mind drinking it but prefer bigger reds. About 9y ago I put in 15 Durif vines with idea I'd blend them with Shiraz to get a bigger red, but I'm enjoying the Durif so have yet to do it. Occasionally a bucket of fruit falls into my lap & it's going to make a wine (if not jam) so FAWG has shown me that fruit wines are good to try - I made a white nectarine wine a few years ago that had great flavour (now have a tree, still young) & have been combining quince/apple/damsom plum for a summer sparkly.



Glen Fortune has a Presidents Question for you:

Question: Recently I discovered that Steve is an avid Photographer my question for him is Does developing a great wine give you more of a challenge than developing a great photo.
No pun intended!!

Steve: Glen, yes & no. With a wine you take it step-by-step over several months for one wine. With digital photography, you take many pics & select some to photoshop & then decide which is best to your eye (all in a few hours), then enter into a competition where a judge may/may not agree with your eye. Wine's a more physical assessment, photography is more subjective (but with some physical rules that may be good to break). But for both - you make for **your** taste & if the judge happens to be wrong (different from you - go figure?.....) just suffer in silence/try another judge/think about the judge's opinion/move on.

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.

Steve: Yes & no. It doesn't hurt to have detailed knowledge of tech aspects, but I've found when I ask other wine-makers there will be a variety of answers - at the end of the day, you make the decision based on which advice seems right & if it doesn't work, do it different next year. But it's your decision & your wine! I think my tastes are varying over time too, & that influences the wine I make, e.g. for a while I made less acidic & less oak wines but now want to go the

other way (of course, the fruit will be a factor here too).

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.

Steve: Not really. I subscribe to the 'neck oil' classification of wine - Ter-rific neck oil (gold), Great neck oil (silver), Good (bronze) etc etc. And most important of all, to judge the neck oil rating, don't spit it out! The key factor to me is that when you taste a good gold wine it'll make your palate sing.



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.

Steve: I tend to trust the process & not tinker too much, esp. at start. Yes pH control, enzyme etc, and choose a yeast that gives complexity, but it'll be a few months in before you get a reasonable idea. I made CabSav with Briars group when it first started & the pressed wine tasted like crap & I thought this isn't going to work. But a few months later things had rounded out & once bottle-aged a year or three, it was a great wine. Many moons ago, I tried a Yaldara red & it tasted like it'd been made in

a test tube - awful - & I assume they'd tinkered too much. I am starting to experiment with tannin additives a little but that's because of a few grape growing problems that are now fixed (I hope).

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.

Steve: It's one of several retirement interests. I like to be creative & to keep busy, I get bored otherwise. I like the creativity in wine-making & then I get to enjoy what comes out at end & there's multiple ends because you get to taste your wines over several years. But it's mostly about the reds - I keep trying whites but I've yet to have that moment when I think mmmm a white would be nice. My consuming passion is to make a red like Booth's Tamnick - in 2011 they'd agreed to sell me a couple '00kg of shiraz but that was a disastrous La-Nina year & they lost the whole crop. By then I was busy with Briars group & my MtM crop was coming in so I've never followed up.





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

Steve: I've been with FAWG about 13y & while people I talk to seem interested in home wine making, they seldom follow through. I haven't seen much outside interest in the making, probably because there are many drinkable \$10-20 wines in Oz. At one of our shows, a judge told me we should be called Frankston Fine WineMaking Guild & I think that's a good idea. 'Home-making' & 'Amateur' don't fully convey what we're about.

A good point of difference is the fruit wine we produce & that might grab more people to have a go (not with milk kegs though).

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

Steve: All of the above, plus BIG RED. Each year, the grapes vary with climate/location etc so the inspiration is to make the best wine from what comes through the growing season.

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

Steve: FAWG has many good wine-makers & David Hart & Chris Myers are a given. But just getting snippets of advice/info from other members can set you up for better winemaking. E.g. what yeast was used in a red wine you like, what/how oaked, pH etc - all questions to ask at the show. I mentioned earlier, there's different advice from different makers & at end

of day you may not get a definitive answer - you have to decide & then learn from your mistakes/triumphs.

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

Steve: I've a large garage attached to house & during winemaking my car lives outside a few weeks (until it's all in demis on benches). It's a good location because it opens into laundry, has concrete apron in front & a wide channel drain. I use lots of water to sterilise & wash everything so it works well, & then I pack crusher/press etc into a corner until next year.



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

Steve: Finding like-minded wine tragics, and some really nice wines. Meetings are great, esp. with trying different wines (makes me try whites).

Dave: What were you drinking in your twenties. How is this different to what you drink now.

Steve: I drank beer & stout until my 40s. The few times I tried wine I bought a cheap one in case I didn't

like it, & of course I didn't like it because it was cheap! I mostly drink red wines I produce, occasionally a Booth's, & for beer I've a son & son-in-law who are excellent brewers (no kits, they do it all - roasting, boiling, fresh hops).

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

Steve: Go back in time & get an ancestor to start a vineyard in Heathcote - in the 1950s/60s Heathcote was our family go-to for holidays with friends of family (no longer with us), not much wine then.

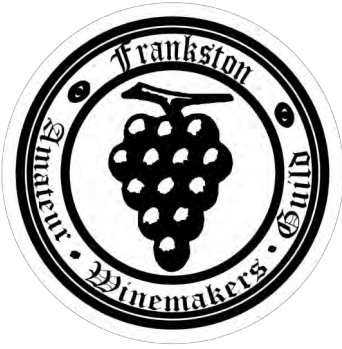
For life advice - don't say no to an opportunity but be careful to keep a good work/life balance.

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.

Steve: Most reds, but esp. Durif & Shiraz. The Sparkling Shiraz was an interesting focus group & wine from it is great. Guild meetings/tastings/shows always give ideas a good working over.

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

Steve: I used to use an Enoltech Elite Shiraz yeast & it lasted several years in frig, but by then it was no longer available, so I always seek a yeast that gives various complexities to wine (now using a Vintessential yeast ES488 & it seems close to the other one).



I plunge the wines in open ferment 10-15 times a day - usually I'm just passing & will stop & plunge; skins that are floating won't get as extracted as the mixed ones.

I watch the Sentia devices being used at FAWG, but I'm happy with the TLC malo-lactic test method (I can test 6 wines at once & view both M & L spots to see how it's progressing).

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.

Steve: Apart from my pre-FAWG disasters above, I once made a sparkling shiraz with 2 other members & it was decidedly rough (bad 'quinine' aftertaste) after bottling - wisdom was to leave a few years for it to mellow, but after 5y still as rough as ever so I fed it to the drain monster. A learning experience was a CabSav ~2013 - my other wines were through MLF so I assumed it'd be & bottled it; 2y later it was spritzzy due to MLF ongoing in bottle (even with SO₂), so I put it back in demi, aerated to dissipate SO₂, inoculated with malo bacterium, kept over 18C, but over 6mo it didn't move, still malo residue (it was ~70% through). Eventually I triple SO₂'d it & rebottled, no more spritz (maybe that's what commercial wineries do?).

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.

Steve: Just creating a good product from our efforts on the block. Also now producing small quantities of olive oil, dried apricots & jam, other fruits; did try hops but it was strangled by native grasses

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.

Steve: Music - Imagine (John Lennon), any Shiraz from Booth's (say the Cliff memorial wine), The Heather Rising (Colm Tobin), crusty bread & a big wedge of tasty cheese like we got from S.Melb. Market when I was a kid.

