

My Vintage Year

By: Dave Chambers

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.

Today it is Val Henry: Val and Pam Henry are well known in the Frankston Guild. They are the first people to arrive in the kitchen to help with cleaning up. Val is becoming a skilled Wine Maker. He is intelligent with a sharp sense of humour. He is engaging and willing, we are lucky to have their participation in the guild. Val was the first to put up his hand to host the up-and-coming Wine Makers Lunch.

If you are quick, you can still get a place at Val and Pam's Lunch on Saturday 24th June at 12pm.

I found his wine making journey fascinating. I can't wait to experience his hospitality at their home in June.



Dave: Why wine and not beer.

Val: Wine with its history, mystique & my curiosity it was never going to be second fiddle to beer.

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.

Val: After we retired, we did a coach trip around France, which included stopping at some towns associated with wine like Beaune, Chateau Neuf-du-Pape, St Emilio, and had a wine tasting at 10.00am in the dungeon of a chateau outside

Bordeaux. That awoke the beast within and my interest in wine had returned. When I got back here I went on Google not knowing what I was looking for. First, I came across Shiraz Republic where you could rent a row of vines for a year and help out with the process of making the wine, the multiple trips to Heathcote seemed like a vineyard too far for me. Sometime later I found Eltham Wine Guild with a reference to FAWG. I had an adrenaline rush or to coin a Irish phrase "WE WERE SUCKING DIESEL." I then did the winemaking course at the guild and that was the start of my winemaking adventure.

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

Val: My first job was working in a small hotel with a fabulous restaurant, one of my duties was waiting on tables, taking drink orders and quite often having to recommend wine, so I had to get to know my sweet from dry and light from full bodied, I bought an encyclopaedia of wines and spirits and I had got the wine bug. After a couple of years I wanted a more

hands on experience so I wrote to Premier Grand Cru, Chateau Haut-Brion. I asked if I could help with the harvest, they said yes. So, with my bag packed and my French translation book in my back pocket I set off for France and to Bordeaux. I didn't care too much for the food and without a word of French, after a few days I decided to leave Bordeaux to the French and headed back to London, where I quickly got a job and my venture into oenology was put to bed for the moment.

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

Val: Pam and I managed Pubs and clubs in London, England.

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

Val: Firstly, build a cellar under the house and stock it with wines from Haut-Brion

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

Val: This year it is Heathcote Shiraz and Merlot from Tom with a few country wines thrown in. I was happy to get the novice winemaker of the year last year. And looking at the names on it, I am in very good company.

Glen Fortune has a Presidents Question for you:

Question: You and Pam are the dynamic duo every time you come to a meeting you are helping and both of you seem to be in sync with each other. My question to you is, are you both in sync with the wine making too, or do you have different opinions on that subject, if so what are they.

Val: Pam helps me with all aspects of the winemaking from picking, destemming, crushing and bottling, but doesn't drink it, but is happy to taste it and give her opinion. Not having 2 connoisseurs in the house leaves double for me

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.

Val: They say wine is made in the vineyard. If the grapes are good and the Ph is within an acceptable range then I will let it do its own thing. Sometimes I think the less interference the better.

I have tried singing but it doesn't seem to work.

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.

Val: I enjoy going to wineries and being able to discuss the making of wine and being able to hold a knowledgeable conversation with the winemaker.

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.

Val: No I'm not, some wineries employ a chemist while others would shoot them on sight. Some winemakers only use their palate I would love to have a palate like that but I am working on it every day

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.

Val: To know that you can make wine as good as some that you can buy is very satisfying. The awards confirm if you are improving or not. No it is not a consuming passion, but a very rewarding hobby

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

Val: With FAWG and Eltham Guild and shops like Homemakeit and people like Glen, I think home wine making is in good hands for many years to come

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



Val: I have only been making wine for 6 years but it is the same motivation that made me head for France many moons ago. If the wine is good then the medals will follow. They say if at first you don't succeed try, try again. The door to knowledge is always open asking and tasting is the key here.

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

Val: I would say the guild has been the biggest influence. David Hart and Zenon are the go to people but really the guild members are just so willing to share and advise.

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

Val: All reds are made in the garage, the fruit wines get started in the kitchen then moved under the stairs.

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

Val: As well as the winemaking, the members are a very social lot and we enjoy getting together with them always.

Dave: What were you drinking in your twenties.

Val: Southern Comfort and Coke, Gin and Tonic and when in Ireland poteen

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

Val: I would tell him to be more adventurous with food and to use his French translation book. Also to travel the world while he is still young.

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.

Val: I enjoy trying different grapes and fruit to see what unfolds. The guild was what I was looking for but didn't know anything like that existed. I also enjoy the social side and are looking forward to hosting The Winemakers Lunch coming up on Saturday 24th June.

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

Val: Not having a cellar or cool room when I am bulk aging I keep the wine in tubs of water with a few ice bottles thrown in. There is less fluctuation in temperature that way. After bottling what is not drunk I keep in large Eskys again with water and coloured rubber bands for identification.

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.

Val: Not having a Ph meter at the time I was taking note of what other people were posting and I figured that mine would be something similar, so I added Tartaric Acid. Or so I thought. The Tartaric Acid was getting low, so I put it on the list to buy. A few days later I noticed that I had plenty of acid, but low in Oxyclean. So I had my suspicion that things weren't right. Took it to Homemakeit and Zenon did a Ph test which was nearly off the scale. After a bit of discussion, he recommended a shovel full of acid. After arriving home I confirmed I had used the wrong thing. Now I have clean pipes in the laundry.

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.

Val: To create something that you can share with family and friends and be proud of it. The money spent has never come into it

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.

Val: Pam's Lamb Shanks in Red Wine with lots of Veggies. Ellie Sherlock CD, a bottle of Haut Brion and a book by Frank Hardy, Power Without Glory.