

Cope-Rule Britannia

Being a Brit, and there is no mistaking that! Gordon Cope-Williams has forged a little piece of England in the chilly Romsey-shire of Victoria. Besides his well-established winery Gordon has recently entered the wine tourism game with the completion of an impressive 21 room residential conference facility targeted at the corporate market. But the complex is far beyond a few rooms stuck in a vineyard. Gordon was initially famous for his walled garden and cricket pitch with obligatory English pavilion which opened in 1987. Add to that the indoor “Royal Tennis” Court and a residential pack of King Charles Spaniels to boot and you have a modern Hampton Court, Southern Hemisphere style. With Cope-Williams hands-on style of management visitors can be guaranteed an audience with King Gordon in the complexes ‘Hare & Spaniel’ Winebar each day.

Located on the northern slopes of Mount Macedon around 50km north of Melbourne, the complex has over 1500 roses both around the cricket pitch and in the Formal Rose Garden. Instead of the traditional white picket fence to the cricket ground Cope-William uses white iceberg roses. There is also a private garden open to the public on special occasions. Besides a growing conference market the vineyard has recently promoted wedding packages using the attractive rose garden for an outdoor setting, and Gordon is now thinking of adding a few more rooms to the complex.

For those of you who are not familiar about the difference between normal tennis and ‘Royal’ tennis, I’m lead to believe, it is the combination of squash and chess. The game, which dates back to the 14 century, is played by hitting a ball made of tape (that barely bounces) with a bent racquet, using the floor, walls and penthouse roof. The court resembles the “cloisters of a medieval monastery”. Cope-Williams have actually formed a Royal Tennis Club at the vineyard which is only the 39th club in the world. Current membership stands at 200 with 120 drawn from the local area. It gets fully booked and averages 65 hours a week of court time. Such is the demand that time is reserved for residents, especially when conference groups book the facility.

The tennis court is modelled on the court at Hampton Court Palace in England which was built around 1530 by Henry VIII. Legend has it that whilst the King was playing on court at the palace he heard about the execution of his wife Queen Anne Boleyn.

On the wine-side Cope-William specialise in fizz. With a mean January temperature of only 17.2°C and a harvest that can creep into June it is not surprising that the Macedon Ranges suits the production of sparkling wines. The climate in these parts is similar to Reims, the capital of Champagne in France. Their top wine is called R.O.M.S.E.Y a non vintage sparking made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, matured on lees under the cricket pavilion of course! For legal reasons the sparkling could not be called simply ‘Romsey’ as that is the regional name. However Gordon was determined to have a two syllabi name, “ We had a conundrum. If you look at all the great sparkling wines of the world such as Cava and Champagne they are all have two syllabi’s whilst the name Macedon has three, so we decided to keep to R.O.M.S.E.Y.... and it has worked” explains Gordon. The sparkling wine is grown, fermented, bottled and disgorged in the Shire of Romsey so why not.

Gordon also produces a Cope-Williams Vintage Brut and a NV Sparkling Red called Coniston (could be a Lake-District connection here). The winery has established a system similar to a number of Champagne producers where they code their non-vintage wines with the year and the number of disgorgement (when the wine was taken off its lees) for that year. This is to enable the customer to check how long the NV has been “on the shelf” as it is generally considered ready to drink as soon as the wine is released and after recently tasting a ‘flat’ NV Champagne I wholeheartedly agree with the practice.

But it has not been all plain sailing for Cope-Williams. “We first planted vines on Rocky Hill in 1977” Gordon explains, the hill is part of an extinct volcano located another 100 or so metres above the already cool 600 metre position of the present vineyard. “The vines were not growing, it would have taken us two years to produce one harvest!” “It was never going to work so in 1982 we moved down from the mountain” Their problems were far from over. What they found next was rich basalt soils on what was old dairy and potato farmland and the vines became too fertile. “We didn’t bother to train our vines in the first year and the whole vineyard looked like a paddock of ivory” They overcame the fertility problem by thinning the vines out, and off-course trellising. Once the vigour was under control they then had to learn how to make wines from high acid and low sugar fruit. Not surprisingly all his wines go through malolactic fermentation to rid them of the harsher malic acid. Due to his cool climate location Gordon supports the legalisation of chaptalization (the addition of sugar to must). The laws governing chaptalization were laid down in the 60’s and at that time there was no substantial cool climate vineyards so the modern problems encountered by winemakers were not an issue at the time, but how times have changed.

Gordon has planted 25 acres of pinot, chardonnay and some cabernet, which he admits, “Makes a bloody good late bottled vintage port, and not much else!” The region is too cold for full-bodied reds although he might try Shiraz which seems to fair better. There are some excellent reds coming from the region such as Virgin Hills, but it is a tricky business getting the fruit ripe and requires careful site selection. We tried a 1992 Pinot laced with French oak, which was drinking well, it exemplifies the cellaring qualities of this sometime difficult variety. Considering his active finger in many pies Gordon has a new winemaker, David Cowburn, to assist the winery side of the business.

I should add that Gordon, besides being ever-so handy in the vineyard and garden, he also used his grounding as an architect and design the conference centre!