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Bimonthly Year 6 No. 26
HKD 65 / RMB 65 / SGD 9 / MYR 22
THB 200 / IDR 20,000



The perfect encounter

Tim Kirk of Clonakilla Wines in the Canberra District speaks of his faith, his love of family and music and his quest for the perfect encounter between aroma, flavour and texture

by Simone Madden-Grey

It is a brilliantly sunny day in Melbourne as I head towards one of the city's essentials for any wine lover, the City Wine Shop. I am meeting Tim Kirk of Clonakilla Wines upstairs in the Supper Club before he leads a dinner at the same venue, showcasing some of the best from Clonakilla, one of few wineries categorised as 'Exceptional', in the Langton's Classification of Australian Wines. To talk about wine with Kirk is to take a broader view of the world, admiring beauty in that which surrounds us, whether expressed in nature, in a melody or in a piece of fine art. It is the allure of beauty that captivates Kirk and his wines could easily be seen as an extension of that lens through which he views the world. Situated just north of Canberra, near the village of Murrumbateman you will find the Clonakilla estate including the original vineyard planted by Dr John Kirk in 1971, to which his son Tim and Tim's wife Lara augmented

This page, the grape pressing process at Clonakilla. When John Kirk planted the very first vineyard in 1971, he never imagined that his vineyard would become one of the best in the country. In 1971, Kirk bought a 44 acre farm from Murrumbateman, with the soil composed of sandy clay loams. Today, the winery produces 10,000 to 12,000 cases each year.

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in the late 1990s with purchases of new parcels.

This is a family – no, it is a community business with the family at the heart of that community. As Kirk puts it, “I often talk about our job as a winemaking community and that is how I see Clonakilla. Our wine is made by the community of those working in the vineyard, in the winery, in the cellar and in sales and communications; we make the wine together and together present it to the world.” Kirk’s view of life is also deeply imbued with a

“spiritual stream that runs through my life, as a committed Catholic and as part of the Catholic sense of the world there is beauty in creation, whether that be a beautiful sunset, a gorgeous valley, a wonderful ocean or texture, aroma or flavour – these are very sensual experiences and wine fits so easily into that.”

This statement not only references his faith but also his early training in theology, before he returned to the family vineyard to take up position as Chief Winemaker. It is that sense of wonderment at the natural world and a search for that perfect encounter between aroma, flavour and texture that forms the stylistic template for all of Clonakilla’s wines. The Kirk family are a family of pioneers and this spirit articulates itself across several generations. Dr John Kirk’s cousin Sean O’Riada, for whom the O’Riada Shiraz is named, spearheaded a revival of traditional Irish music in



his homeland during the 1960s and perhaps played a role in the formation of a young John Kirk’s fearlessness. In the late 1960s Dr John Kirk moved his family from Ireland to Canberra to take up a research position with CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) and in his weekends he planted vines – in a region where no vines were planted. Fast-forward to the 1990s and Dr Kirk’s son, Tim, having recently returned from

a European trip would continue in this pioneering spirit to create one of Australia’s most iconic red wines.

It was a time when, as Tim describes it, “the Australian model of Shiraz of South Australia was these wonderfully rich and black fruited Shiraz wines, powerful and warming, very wonderful yet quite different” to the wines he would go on to make. In speaking of his family and his place within it, Kirk describes his family as very intellectual, which is no surprise given both parents have PhDs in biochemistry, and he says amiably, his five brothers are “vastly more clever than I am”. He describes his offering as more artistic, more emotional rather than intellectual. This I find curious as it is abundantly clear within minutes of sitting down with him, that here is a man who not only has great intellect but who thinks deeply about that which has shaped him – his faith and his family – and how this impacts his artistic sensibilities and indeed, his approach to winemaking.

This page, top, Tim Kirk shared his winemaking journey with «Spirito diVino Asia» at the City Wine Shop (Photos by Rick Liston); bottom, Shiraz Vignier 2015, and Ceoltóirí 2015, powerful and aromatic, are ranked the highly-esteemed Langton’s Classification of Distinguished Australian wines. Right page, an artistic image showing the pressed grapes in hand.



Looking back to his European trip of 1991, it was a visit to Guigal in Côte-Rôtie and a tasting of barrel samples from La Landonne, La Turque and La Mouline that would set the course for Kirk's winemaking journey of the future. La Mouline, he tells me, "is the greatest Shiraz Viognier vineyard in the world. Here was something from the Rhône Valley that was altogether different; they were complex wines, rather than beat you over the head with sheer power they drew you in with extraordinary allure like a perfume ... subtle perfume, floral perfume, red perfumes like red berries, raspberries and cherries, but very difficult to actually put your finger on what you were smelling and that is what kept drawing you back to the glass." It was an ethereal dimension to the wines, which enchanted him. "And then the texture too was different to the Australian robust tannin, these were wines that had a silkiness on the palate." Kirk was not alone in his fascination and it wouldn't be long before leading Australian wine critics recognised the unique quality of these wines, with awards and accolades not far behind. Today the wines from Clonakilla enjoy a strong following, particularly at home which dominates their market footprint. That isn't to say however, that export markets are neglected with regular trips throughout Asia opening new doors in mainland China, Korea, Thailand and Japan, whilst at the same time continuing



to develop long-standing relationships in Hong Kong and Singapore. Further afield a return to the US market will see Clonakilla working closely with partners in that region, not to mention their well-established market in the United Kingdom. With a full schedule of travel, events and winemaking it is a wonder Kirk is able to find time for another great pleasure in his life, music. Confessing to my previous life as a professional flute player we compare

our thoughts on the relationship between music and wine. "I love music" he tells me, "but I can't claim that as my own as I come from a very musical family." Perhaps that is behind the naming of recently released Châteauneuf-du-Pape inspired, Ceoltóirí, which means "gathering of musicians" in Gaelic. I couldn't agree more when he says that for him, "it is a very short step from music, sound, melody and harmony to aromas, flavour and texture." As to the potential parallels between one's emotional response to music and that which might occur with wine? It is, Kirk tells me, "a response to beauty. It is so powerful... it is the great thing about both music and wine that I absolutely adore." And in this, he has captured the innate quality that epitomises these wines; the deft hand when crafting elegance and restraint and the perfect encounter between perfume, flavour and texture that sets the wines of Clonakilla apart from so many others. 🍷

This page, top, the exquisite interior of Supper Club which is located above the City Wine Shop in Melbourne (Photo by Rick Liston); bottom, Clonakilla vineyard in autumn, echoing Tim Kirk's admiration of beauty in creation (Photo by David Reist). Right page, Shiraz was being picked in the vineyard. The Shiraz Viognier is the flagship of Clonakilla (www.clonakilla.com.au).

