

One thing leads to another...

Willow Creek's Phil Kerney

Winemakers are a funny breed. You never know what you're going to get and this couldn't be more true than in the case of Phil Kerney from Willow Creek Vineyard in Merricks North.

Phil, a self described "intense ratbag", knocked about the underground rock and roll scene in Sydney in the 70's and 80's. Early on he studied electrical engineering, as well as working as a locksmith and musician. He was a rock and roll personality playing in and managing many bands during this time. It seems the Punk Philosophy of DIY is still serving him well.

It's completely evident that when Phil sets his mind to something he not only has a go at it, he wholly demolishes it. He has a Gemini brain that wants to do everything, pull it apart and get under its skin.

Take for instance his first foray into winemaking.

In 1990, when he was working for Channel Nine as a technical director, Phil went to the Flemington Market. He stumbled upon a truck full of Shiraz grapes from the Riverland so he decided to line up with the Greeks and Italians, buy four boxes and have a go. He got out his copy of the Grange winemaker Max Schubert's classic "The Rewards of Patience" and set about making his own version of the great wine.

He describes himself at that age as "having no patience" having been in an industry that lived week to week. It was a revelation when he pressed this first red and realised it was going to take a year before he could drink it. It was at this point he decided he wanted to make wine fulltime, and threw

himself head first into learning as much as he could.

Ultimately Phil believes his love of wine primarily sprang from a love and fascination with food. When Phil was a teenager his mum did an international cooking course. It was a revelation for Phil. When she was finished, she went back to cooking chops and veg and Phil carried on.

Not long after he'd been making his "Grange" in the backyard he came to Melbourne with a friend for a weekend. They spent a day in the Yarra Valley drinking Pinot. Ending up at the now closed city restaurant Mietta's they ordered the first burgundy Phil had ever tasted, a 1987 Corton Les Bresandes, and love affair with Pinot Noir began.

By 1994 Phil had enrolled in a wine science degree by correspondence through Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, he clocked up one or two vintages a year throughout this period in wineries throughout Australia as well as Spain, France and New Zealand. He also crammed in every possible trade and public tasting he could find.

In 1995, teamed up with the owners of Sydney's Wine Gallery, they won Winestate Magazine's National Wine Options game and a trip to New Zealand to compete at the next level.

Phil joined the team at Willow Creek in October 2001 completing his first vintage in 2002. For Phil no two days are alike, winemaking is a good fit. As the General Manager and Winemaker at Willow Creek Vineyard in Merricks North his days are diverse. As well as winemaking he may be looking after distribution issues, working with the restaurant, handling media or events.

The basis of Phil's philosophy is that "great wine is the cornerstone of a great brand."

The foundations were laid when he arrived at Willow Creek, and he has set about pushing it to the next level.



The biggest changes Phil has introduced are lower cropping levels, limiting irrigation, stridently using only Estate grown fruit and meticulous barrel management.

From the 2005 vintage onward all wine has undergone wild yeast ferments. The wild yeasts leave no artificial characteristics in the wine, as well as providing a textural feel to the wine rather than artificial estery aromas which can be imparted by some commercial yeasts.

Moving forward, Phil is exploring the possible biodynamic management of the vineyard. He believes there is no reason the natural transition of grape juice into wine should involve anything unnatural.

The 2003 Tulum Pinot and Cabernet are unfinned and unfiltered, and it is his intention that the rest of the reds will soon follow suit incorporating wild yeast ferments and no added acid. As he puts it "wine should be the greatest expression of the site, season, variety and region. The universe is flowing straight through it; winemaking is beyond being just an industrial process."

And the proof is in the bottle.

Willow Creek's most awarded wine is their 2001 Cabernet (a wine Phil finished off when he first arrived at Willow Creek). Closely following is the 2002 Chardonnay, the first wine Phil ever made at the estate.

These wines won the MPVA Trophies at the Lilydale Wine Show for the Best Red and White wines of the show in 2003, making Willow Creek the first producer to ever take out both trophies.

Phil has a habit of naming each vintage. 2002 was the "melancholy" vintage, 2003 the "carefree" vintage, 2004 the "barefoot" vintage (because of the unseasonably hot and warm weather throughout), and as for 2005 – it may be known at Willow Creek as the "schizo" vintage for weather that started out moist and cool (ideal for ripening Chardonnay and Pinot Noir) and then warmed up to perfectly ripen the Cabernet and Shiraz.

Things certainly look promising indeed.

- Emily Davenport