

The 'Tavern on the Hill' is a Real Bottler

by Tim Bracher

There must be days when Ken Burford looks through the drizzle and mists of Main Ridge and thinks about his other option for semi-retirement: a business on Sanur Beach in Bali.

Then again, the busy pace of his latest job - as publican of The Pig and Whistle Tavern in Purves Road - probably doesn't leave much time for such contemplation.

Since 1999, Ken, his wife Sue, son Dean and daughter Georgia have been transforming what was once just a quaint country tavern into a full blown restaurant, garden-style beer garden, music venue and a cellar door facility for the 8 hectare Bayview Estate vineyard.

Ken had dreamt for years about running a pub and had attended many auctions in search of the right venue. It was a short cut he took down Purves Road one day in 1999 that landed him in front of an auction board for the Pig and Whistle. Two weeks later the Melbourne builder had morphed into a publican and, what's more, had managed to enlist the whole family into running the new venture.

However, with solid backgrounds in catering and hospitality, it was not such a culture shock for the women of the family, while son Dean's marketing and sales background provided the final piece of the puzzle.

Ken readily admits that his semi-retirement has been harder work than the building trade because of the long hours and constant exposure to the public, but the genial host looks so comfortable in the role you'd be forgiven for thinking that he had been born into the business.

In an era of minimalist décor and over-stylised cuisine - even in many hotels - it's surprising to find a pub in the real old tavern style. The bistro and restaurant exudes warmth and friendliness, while the servings are certainly hearty. An extension 3 years ago created ample space for larger groups and weddings. The imposing stone fireplace took a local craftsman 3 months to build and is the centrepiece of the tavern during colder months.

Outside, a spacious grassed area bordered by rose and lavender gardens is used for weddings and functions, or simply as space to let the kids run off some weekend steam. A surprising bonus is the stunning view across paddocks and bushland to the narrow neck of the Southern Peninsula, Port Phillip Heads and Point Lonsdale. You'd travel a long way to find a beer garden with a more sublime outlook. It's not surprising, therefore, that a sunny Sunday can see the beer garden full to capacity with everyone enjoying the food, drinks, music and that view.

The Pig and Whistle is unashamedly modelled on the intimacy of an English pub. Low ceilings, cosy corners, open fire, hearty meals and lots of



banter creates an ambience in which James Herriott would feel comfortable. It's not surprising, therefore, that the place is a magnet for the large ex-pat' British community on the Peninsula and their guests from the old country. Some solid marketing during recent years by Dean Burford has seen its reputation spread internationally. Singaporeans and North Americans are particularly attracted to the quirky rustic tavern, its gardens, the variety of beers.... and that amazing bay view.

The bistro menu boasts such English culinary gems as steak and kidney, bangers and mash, plowman's lunch and pork pie, among more standard fare. The evening cuisine is simply described as 'contemporary' by the Burfords, but a string of industry awards attest to its quality.

The restaurant is a must for serious foodies, especially aficionados of prime steak. The signature dish - the 450g King Island Eye Fillet Soyed Beef - tops the list, which also includes a 550g Rib Eye, a 500g T-Bone, a 450g Porterhouse and Scotch Fillet.

While there, you must sample the microbrewed beer range, consisting of the Big Pig Amber Ale and the Four Seasons Knacker beers. If beer isn't to your taste, try the award winning Bayview Estate Pinot Gris, which won silver and bronze at the 2002 and 2003 International Cool Climate Wine Show. A panel of independent judges voted the 2001 Pinot Gris as the best Pinot Gris entered in the competition.

The grapes of Bayview Estate were among the first to be planted on the Peninsula over 30 years ago and today you can enjoy 16 different varietal wines. The wines are sold at Crown Casino restaurants, Kooyong Tennis Club, while a host of Melbourne restaurants and select bottle shops feature the Bayview Estate range. The wines are also exported to Asia each year.

The property was one of the early farms of Main Ridge and the 1915 dairy has been transformed into the vineyard's cellar door facility.

Despite the success with wines, it is probably the brewing side of the business that leaves the most indelible memory on guests. Resident brewer, Bill Wilson, spent 25 years working for one of England's top brewing companies, during which time he also managed to hone his skills to become one of the country's dart champions. Bill now turns his skill to producing a series of four beers to reflect the seasonal variations as well as the Big Pig Amber Ale.

There are also 120 beers from around the world to get to know. The tasting notes guide drinkers to beers with names and labels as varied as the contents. Ask for an 'Old Fart' or a 'Sexy Lager' and beer may never seem the same again.

Before your world beer tour starts to take affect, make sure you examine the memorabilia of the tavern. You could spend an hour just scouring the walls and ceilings. This is not a tacky 'theme bar', just a hugely eclectic collection of mementoes and nostalgia gathered by previous owners, the Burford's and guests who return from overseas jaunts.

The Pig and Whistle is open daily for lunch and dinner, but book ahead because it's not unusual for a group of golfers from Cape Schanck or corporate types on a conference to just drop-in for a bite. As the only pub in the hinterland with beer on tap, it's also a favourite haunt of the locals. The place is also a godsend for nearby B&B guests who previously had slim pickings if they wanted to dine out early in the week.

If music is your passion, then head to the P&W on a Friday night, or on a Sunday afternoon for some Latin rhythm, but whenever you choose to visit, there will be plenty to entertain you on the walls alone.

Oh, and about that name...just look at the explanation as you enter the tavern. Like everything else at the Pig and Whistle, it's a good story !