

MAX PAGANONI'S PENINSULA |

The pioneering spirit that brought the Paganoni family from Lombardia in Northern Italy to the apple country of Tyabb in 1908, has also found expression in their grandson Max.

In 1993, the then 26 year old chef saw the potential of combining quality dining with the Peninsula's fledgling wine industry.

A cooperative venture with Sir Peter Derham at the magnificently sited Red Hill Estate resulted in a dining experience without parallel in Victoria.

With one restaurant under his belt, during the late 1990s Max Paganoni also took over Madelines in Mornington, refurbished it, & rebadged it as 'Estasi'.

Now, after a decade operating 'Max's at Red Hill Estate'; a local olive oil also bearing his name; five years of conducting food and wine tours to Italy and having just opened a B&B, we got him to pause for a while and chat about his already colourful career.

Were you ever tempted to follow in the family apple tradition ?

The Paganonis are still involved in orcharding, but the apple trees were being ripped out by the time I came along. I grew up with 4 brothers & sisters on a small dairy and pig farm in Tyabb. I have an English mother, but it was my father's Italian background that influenced those early years.

The Italian philosophy was that if you raised a farm animal, nurtured it and killed it kindly, then it would be happy for you to eat it.

What prompted a farm lad to get into the restaurant business ?

Cooking was something I knew very well, so it was just a natural progression. My mother didn't like cooking, so my interest was largely a matter of survival. I often cooked for the whole family.

After Baxter Tech. I started an apprenticeship at a Chinese restaurant in Frankston. We worked 80 hours a week, serving hundreds of people, but I found that I really enjoyed the whole environment: the food, the people, the madness of working that many hours, and the immense enjoyment of the day off.

I worked as a chef for Olympia Bortolotto in the early days of the Moorooduc Coolstores during the mid 80s. It was the first restaurant of that size on the Peninsula & we were seating 300-350 people a night.

I then backpacked around Europe working as a barman, waiter, cook and dishwasher. At the time it was just a way to raise enough money to get to the next destination, but I now realise that dealing with different nationalities has helped me to cater for the needs of the international clients we attract here in Red Hill.

How did the winery restaurant concept evolve in your mind ?

I started working for Geoff Whiteman at Frescos in Sorrento and one day we were touring the wineries to work out a new wine list. Red Hill Estate was a basic cellar door facility serving cheese platters, but we were knocked out by the view.

as told to Tim Bracher

We spoke to Sir Peter in November 1994 about the possibility of adding a restaurant. He wanted a proposal and by January the following year we opened our doors to 80 people on the first day. After a month of working here and in Sorrento I took over here on a two year trial.

Will history record you as the pioneer of winery dining on the Peninsula ?

It was the first true winery restaurant in the area and possibly in Victoria. Many said I was mad because people would never travel from Melbourne to dine in Red Hill. It was tough initially and I only got through by setting-up credit arrangements with local suppliers. I still use most of them today because of their faith and loyalty in helping me to get on my feet.

For a long time there were days when we didn't have any clients and it took at least 3 years to feel more comfortable. Because you have to outlay so much initially to establish a restaurant, it often takes that long just to get back to 'zero'.

Did you study other wine areas for ideas and inspiration ?

I approached it mainly from a restaurant perspective, but we worked closely with the wine team here to develop the concept. The idea of matching food with wine was almost unheard of on the Peninsula. Because I had travelled a lot I knew that the whole French-Italian mentality is that you always eat food with wine and you always have a certain phrase with a certain food. There was a great phrase I once read on a menu that said "Any meal eaten without wine is obviously breakfast".

How quickly did the other wineries join the bandwagon ?

There wasn't much interest for five or six years - I think they were waiting to see if I went broke. I also think they may have thought that a restaurant would take money away from their cellar door, but the reality is quite the opposite. The restaurant brings people to the cellar door, plus you are selling their wine; it's a win-win situation.

Almost all of the Peninsula wineries have woken up to it now and, if they don't have a restaurant, they're probably applying for one. I think it's a compliment that we're still strong 11 years later.

Did the public take an instant liking to the concept ?

Matching the food and wine gave people a knowledge that was otherwise difficult to obtain. People really embraced being told what to have, which helped to develop their palate.

Is there any local produce which you are proud to use in your dishes ?

There's a lot grown on the Peninsula and I use local produce wherever I can.

Jan and Trevor Brandon of Red Hill Cheese provide me with a 'cheese of the week'.

My olive oil is produced just down the road by David Markey and we use seasonal produce such as Barry Pontifex's quinces and the local strawberries and cherries. We also have local



people calling at the back door selling baskets of what they grow in their gardens. My herb lady, Dawn, has been calling with her box of herbs every week for 10 years.

We design our menu around what is in season. We change the menus seasonally, but we change on the moon rather than the month, because that's when the food changes. That's how it's done in Europe.

Did the winery's State and National tourism awards help your business ?

It made people more aware that we had wineries down here, because the Yarra Valley had stolen the limelight for a long time. Then we started winning awards for our food. Last year we won the American Express Best Restaurant on the Peninsula and Best Restaurant in Victoria. Because it's voted for by American Express card holders, it means a lot more to me than getting an award from someone who is judging us just because it's their job.

What's the most flattering thing any reviewer has said about Max's ?

"Come for the view and stay for the food"

"The most unbelievable restaurant in Victoria"

"The best winery restaurant in the world"

They haven't been from reviewers, but from food writers - and there's a big difference. A reviewer has to score you one out of ten or 20, and they generally feel that they have to find something to criticise in order to give them credibility, while a writer writes about the total experience they had there.

Where do you head on the Peninsula for a break from the kitchen ?

I'm not a stay at home diner. In fact, I get to the stage when I just can't stay at home for another meal. It's a full lifestyle for me; I enjoy meeting people, talking to people, cooking for people, I enjoy the whole concept. When I do cook at home I always invite people around.

I have a lot of favourites on the Peninsula: the Long Table and The Vines and Montalto in Red Hill, Willow Creek in Merricks North and Albert Street Restaurant in Mornington. A good friend of mine, Zac Poulier and his wife Jacqui, recently opened Stillwater @ Crittendens, so I think I'll be dining there a fair bit as well.

What keeps you here ?

My lifestyle. I have horses down here and a lot of business interests.

I get to travel overseas twice a year and in the long term I hope to spend 3 months a year overseas. It's beneficial for the business for me to do that, but I have no intention of leaving the Peninsula.