

A Vineyard On The Ridge

At this time of year Main Ridge Estate is a symphony of green. Vines wearing their full canopies, towering gums and Rosalie's rambling garden surround the cellar door.

Nat and Rosalie White established Main Ridge Estate in 1975 with a desire to escape suburbia and a passion to create wine in the footsteps of the great Burgundian estates. In 1978 they were granted the first commercial winery license on the Peninsula. Since then, with their tiny production of less than one thousand cases per annum, they have managed to develop a cult like following.

This commitment to keeping things small, a size which they can manage together, has meant that their estate is incomparable to any other locally or indeed in Australia – a long relationship has been built with the vines through their very personal experience of each season. The vineyard was established by hand, and when Nat says by hand he means every post and vine hole the couple dug. Nets were placed on and removed by hand with no netting machine to ease the job. Nat remembers it being a two week exercise to get them on and another two weeks to get them off, a task that he and Rosalie did together. It's no surprise Nat delights in the new technologies and expertise now available – a local contractor now comes and nets his vineyard for him in just a day.

I met with Nat after what has been Victoria's wettest February in memory. While there has been a bit of speculation locally about how the rain will affect vintage, he's fairly relaxed, pointing out that the free draining red soils on the ridge absorb the moisture well.

The vineyard is predominantly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay with a couple of "accidents of history" as Nat describes them – a few Pinot Meunier and Merlot vines from which he makes tiny quantities which are also highly sought after.

For Nat the greatest challenge he has set himself is to realise his site's potential in producing

Burgundian style Pinot Noir - after nearly thirty vintages he is awfully close. As he puts it his "site is really cool, comparable in climate to Burgundy". Nat's goal is to make wine of a Burgundian style – subtle, silky and utterly seductive. As he rationalizes it "Pinot is very expensive to make – why aim for anything less than inspirational? Burgundy is still the benchmark."

In Nat's experience, from observing the great estates in Burgundy, the secret to eliminating greenness and making great Pinot is careful vineyard management.

Crop thinning at veraison, the point at which the berries ripen from green to red, is very important. Nat takes off any "backward bunches", bunches that are not ripening at the same rate as the majority of the fruit and if left on would be unripe at picking.

Any one vine might have fruit which varies up to two weeks in ripening time, cutting off the slow ripening bunches is easier earlier in the season than trying to distinguish them at vintage when all the fruit is coloured.

Additionally a heavy crop up to veraison shuts down vigorous foliage growth, after veraison the vine slows down its growing and the berries remain small which is critical to developing great fruit flavours.

Crop thinning is nothing new though Nat is convinced doing it later in the season greatly improves the quality of Pinot Noir.

All the fruit ripening at the same time means Nat can pick earlier and keep the alcohol lower and avoid over ripe plum characters in favour of more classic red berry fruit characters synonymous with great pinot.

Main Ridge was undisputedly the first commercial winery on the Peninsula but Nat is the first to point out that establishing the Peninsula as a wine region was a team effort.

The Peninsula's fledgling vigneron found each other and fostered a community spirit that survives to this day. The vigneron community has grown together and shared skills to develop the region.

The Myer family at Elgee Park, the Stonier family, the Kefford family at Merricks Estate and the Crittenden family at Dromana Estate shared new technology and hard work helping each other.

In the early eighties wine tourism was a foreign concept – Main Ridge seemed like the end of the world for a lot of people, there were few beds for visitors and only a couple of pioneering restaurants. Poffs in Red Hill was



opened by Rosalie's sister Lorraine and her husband Sasha Espoff in 1993. As Nat puts it Poffs "became the Peninsula's first significant fine dining restaurant giving others the courage to follow". Poffs lifted the game and was the beginning of the Peninsula's re creation as one of the great wine and food regions in Australia.

This development of food and wine culture on the Peninsula owes a lot to the Whites' and the Espoffs' visionary influence.

I asked Nat what he likes to eat with Pinot, "I like Pinot between courses, it's when you can really enjoy it. Pinot between courses revives the palate. Beautiful wine should be savoured as an accompaniment to food not used to merely "wash it down". "I only drink Pinot these days, and wooded, malolactic cool climate chardonnay – call it cellar palate if you like but I don't like wasting a day on another variety. If I dare take a bottle of anything else to dinner Rosalie will say "I'll drink water!" "

Nat cites the recent Pinot Noir Celebration as one of the most exciting things to happen for the local industry. It is "by far the biggest thing the MPVA has achieved which has drawn local and international media attention. The Peninsula now owns Pinot Noir in Australia."

It's clear Nat delights in living in his small and friendly community and enjoys the peace and tranquillity of his surrounds. It's well worth a visit up to Main Ridge Estate to experience not only some of the best wine the region has to offer but one of its warmest cellar doors.

Rosalie serves a la carte lunch every Sunday at Main Ridge featuring produce from her organic garden and, of course, the odd bottle of Main Ridge Estate Pinot Noir!

Emily Davenport

