

Prima Ballerina...



PHILLIP WHITE – FOR THE INDEPENDENT WEEKLY.

"Mr. White, I'm not like you", James Hook said as I settled in his Ute. "I am a scientist." He then took me to show a thing or two about McLaren Vale where he worked for the McLaren Vale Grape, Wine and Tourism Association.

In this business, you don't meet many so certain about their role and their determination to fulfill them. Ian Hickinbotham spoke in such a manner when first introduced some 30 years ago; his son Stephen was another. Ray Beckwith too. Now in his mid 90's, he is similarly precise. Probably no other Australians have had such an influence on wine as Hick Snr and Beckwith with their ground breaking work on pH and malo-lactic fermentation now taken for granted by winemakers the world over. Had Stephen not been killed in a plane crash, I'm sure he would have gone on to show us a thing or two.

So here was your writer, suss that we'd run out of such people of serious category, and jaundiced by the thousands of cocksure pretenders and self promoters who fill the vast gap in between. "Their obituaries describe these people as successful business men and they promptly pass into oblivion," wrote Walter James of this mob in 1970. I don't think this will be said of James Hook.

I'd seen Hook the scientist at work when he'd been called in to make an independent judgement on a grape crop.

With another viticultural scientist, Derek Cameron, they succinctly disproved an allegation that the crop was diseased. The brewery which had tried to evade its purchasing contract was forced to keep its bargain, and the conscientious, terrified grower stayed in business.

Now in McLaren Vale, Hook gradually unfolded a severe arsenal of knowledge and attitude. Not only did he show a rare savvy about vine

husbandry, but his deep appreciation of the folly of greed and environmental destruction left most of the wine industry for dead.

Then he sent me some shiraz: an understated bottle, displaying a dancer resting on a chair, named Lazy Ballerina after a canopy management where the vines' canes were organized to resemble the dress of a ballerina. That wine and another release since, with a little viognier, impressed me very deeply, with its character, gastronomic intelligence and promise for the future.



With his parents, James has purchased an unusual, if run down, European garden on the big bend at the south end of Kuitpo forest.

Lot 11 Brookman Rd.



winefightclub

A new tasting room is nearing completion; the garden is gradually regathering its beauty, its silver birches and healthy river red gums standing in bright contrast to the wall of pines opposite, a carpet of winter blooms spread beneath. A peacock admired himself in the reflecting door as we nudged glasses last week.

James the viticulturer had planned four shiraz wines and managed their vines accordingly. Two were from vineyards he considers sufficiently distinctive and suitable to be released as single vineyard wines, to offer numerous points of difference for discussion about the nature of McLaren Vale shiraz. Another is a cross vineyard blend, designed to follow the style of his earlier releases; the fourth is a shiraz viognier.

"I have planned these from the vineyards up", he said, introducing a string of barrel samples. "This exercise is to test my plan, to ensure the wines are sound and true to my original goal, or if any of them require tweaking or blending."

The wine from Dudley Brown's Inkwell vineyard, near the Gulf on California Road, was tighter than most Shiraz, reflecting an uncommonly dense grape cell structure: elegant but highly focused and intense. Next was the contrasting monster from the piedmont of Sellicks Hill, from the vines of Paul Petagna. While closer to typical McLaren Vales shiraz, with cuddly big chocolate and liquorice, this too was tight with mighty tannins, and ever so gradually tapered off into a tail uncommonly elegant and refined after such an opening. Right on the knocker.

The blended wine from various sources, followed closely the earlier Lazy Ballerina style – read masterly – and the last, the shiraz viognier, is a lesson to those who mindlessly blend these varieties in the name of fashion alone. No peach syrup in this baby. Uh-huh. It had all the austere acid and the tannin elegance of the first three wines but with the added tannic finesse that only tiny additions of early picked, cool climate, co-fermented viognier have to offer.

Only the one barrel was faintly suss, still showing a little lazy malolactic ticking away. It'll be fine when the Lazy Ballerina tasting room opens in the spring. Which is something worth waiting for, given the makers success in defining the flavours of his finished wine in advance, then selecting and managing the vineyard to achieve his goal.

We have a new benchmark forming up, there in the forest. I'm hooked.

