

The Pieter van Gent Winery

By Marianne Pietersen

In January 2019 I visited the Pieter van Gent winery in Mudgee. The winery is owned and run by a Dutch family. And not just a winery, but also a vineyard. Obviously not a Dutch tradition. How did this come about?

Pieter van Gent was born in Doetinchem, Holland in 1937. His ancestry includes Johannes Hermanus van Gent (1817 to 1859) ship owner, merchant, distiller of spirits, member of the Municipal Council, Chamber of Commerce and world traveller, who influenced a long line of van Gents. With some fifteen sailing ships in service, he imported into Holland the grains which were sold to distillers and used for his own distilling. He died in 1859 on the way back from the Holy Land and was buried in Schiedam, Holland.

Probably because of this ancestry, in 1958, Pieter entered the employ of wine importer, "Robbers en van den Hoogen", in Arnhem. During his employment, Pieter studied and gained a Diploma of professional skill for 'Retail in Strong Alcohol, Weak Alcohol, and Alcohol-free drinks'. This included learning about all types of French and German wines, Spanish Sherries, Portuguese Ports, Italian red wines and Hungarian Tokays.

One of the owner's sons was the Cellar Master, who was conscripted into the Dutch army which enabled Pieter to assume his position. It was mainly work with French wines from the top chateaus that were imported in bulk and then aged in casks in the underground cellars. The wines were blended where necessary and bottled. Years later a law was introduced that the wines had to be bottled at the chateaus, limiting the bulk imports.

In 1959, Pieter attended the wedding of his cousin Jacques van Gent in Schiedam. Jacques had a brother who was living in Australia and Jacques said to Pieter "Why don't you go to Australia, there is wine there." Pieter took the advice and arrived in Australia in 1959.

Initially, he lived in Sydney, working in wine business there. After a few years he married and a son, Philip, was born in 1966.

In December 1970 Pieter van Gent came to Mudgee to take up the position of Winemaker and Manager for Craigmoor Wines. The Mudgee region is known for its red wines, but Craigmoor's vineyard had just acquired some imported chardonnay stock and was the first to grow chardonnay grapes in Australia.

Says Pieter: *"I officially started my job as Winemaker /Manager on Christmas Eve, when the new owners purchased Craigmoor, but I worked for 2 weeks while Craigmoor was still owned by the Roth family."*

"I was told to forget about making white wine in Mudgee and stick to the reds. I made Chardonnay in 1971, but there was only one hogshead which was not enough to bottle. Dr. Ray Healey and I were both aware that this was the first time the Chardonnay grape was made into a wine in Australia."

Craigmoor marketed straight Chardonnay under the Chardonnay label.

Says Pieter: *"I have written before that Tyrell's may have had Chardonnay in 1972 at the same time as Craigmoor, but it was labeled as Pinot Blanc, not Chardonnay."*

Pieter remained at Craigmoor Winery until 1979 and firmly established Craigmoor as one of the leading wineries in Australia and contributed immeasurably to the establishment of Mudgee as an important wine region.

Pieter was winning every wine medal possible during his career, including the coveted Adelaide Wine Show's Montgomery Trophy in 1974 for Best Burgundy.

In 1979 Pieter set up his own winery and vineyard, also in Mudgee, bringing Chardonnay cuttings along from Craigmoor. Pieter built up a sound business as "Pieter van Gent Winery and Vineyards".

After a successful career Pieter retired in 2006. His son, Philip, bought the business from his dad, and Pieter and his wife retired to Canberra.

Philip grew up in Mudgee and studied media and communications in Sydney. In the 1990s he lived in Holland for a number of years, but when he got back to Australia, he studied winemaking in Wagga and worked with his father for ten years.

He now leads the company into the new era, respecting the environment through organic farming, recycling and restoration of native wetlands and billabongs.

The winery is situated in a very scenic landscape, about 8km north of Mudgee town. The vineyard grows eight varieties of grapes from which the winery produces three reds, a rose, a moscato, three whites and four ports, including the famous and original Mudgee White Port.

Wines can be tasted at the cellar door, in an authentic barrel hall which is dotted with barriques, puncheons, antique choir stalls, and flanked by twenty old German cobweb covered oak casks (circa 1850) used for storing wines. These casks came from Penfolds Cellars in the famous Queen Victoria Building in Sydney, and create an atmospheric environment, while the wines within slowly mature.

By contrast, technology meets tradition in the winery's separate tank room where the grapes start the transition into wine in steel vats.

Philip is a strong advocate for sustainable farming and creates an environment that nurtures the vines, the body and the soul. He always keeps an eye out for new grape varieties and in 2018 he introduced prosecco into the vineyard. The vineyard uses bore water and drip lines, but thanks to regular storms they don't need to pump a lot of water.

When I visited the winery and had a taste of some of its products, I chose to buy some of the White Port, Moscato, Mistella and Liqueur Muscat. These are all sweet, yes, I have a sweet tooth. I'm sure the non-sweet wines are just as enjoyable and I recommend a relaxed wine-tasting visit if you're in the area. You'll love the atmosphere in the barrel hall and shop.

The Winery offers some limited accommodation, but there's no restaurant. However, they also have bicycles for hire. They are Dutch after all.