



Interview with Tim Heath.
Winemaker, Katnook Coonawarra.



**Tell us a bit about your formative years.
How did you choose a career in
winemaking?**

I grew up in Adelaide and often spent holidays in the country and on farms, which instilled my love for the land.

At University, I studied science, which I describe as the language of nature - how the world works. I particularly loved chemistry and worked part time in a kitchen in North Adelaide. Here, I entertained the idea of becoming a chef but the hours were too taxing, even worse than a winemaker!

I stumbled into wine almost through a process of elimination, as it seemed like an enticing mix of sensory and science.

It also looked like too much fun to be a real job, so I started studying winemaking at the University of Adelaide in 1994 and graduated in 2000.

My first four years winemaking were at Mountadam before I was offered a job as winemaker for Cloudy Bay. Here I worked for fourteen amazing years. I travelled extensively through Europe, engaging in technical exchanges and dialogue. This included time in Bordeaux at the likes of Margaux, Palmer, Lafite, Rothschild and Cos D'Estournel, which is sure to be of benefit when making Katnook Cabernet Sauvignon.

I love my career. Every season is different and truly keeps me on my toes.

Who was your early role model?

David Hohnen at Cape Mentelle for his sensory skills, nose for opportunity, integrity and the way he operates. Cape Mentelle had just been purchased by Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy when I joined the group, so I learned a great deal from David.

Whose winemaking do you admire now?

I am more inspired by winemakers from regions than by individuals. I admire the winemakers as a collective from Burgundy and the Upper Loire - the way they are tied to the land. While human intellect plays an important role, especially in Bordeaux where they are precise, for me it is more about the dirt.

During your years in New Zealand, what inspired you as a winemaker?

The New Zealand wine industry is amazing. I was inspired by how the wine fraternity there looks outwards and has a good understanding and awareness of wine in all corners of the globe. It is a credit to them that they have had such success in a relatively short time.

I was also inspired by the scenery and wilderness, which I will miss greatly. However, I have bought a four wheel drive and camped near Coonawarra under the stars with my family. The wide open spaces here are very special.

In your opinion, how important are art, science and process in quality winemaking?

I think the best winemakers are craftsmen, rather than artists or scientists. Our job is to look, observe, adapt and use art, science and process as tools to become the best we can.

To what extent do you agree with...

Success is all about tasting, from harvest to barrel aging. That is, tasting with the experience and knowledge to work with each vintage, making the right decisions at each step along the way.

100% agree. To taste, taste, then taste again is essential. The first thing I did when I arrived at Katnook Coonawarra was to taste each of the 1 500 barrels of wine in the winery, so that I could set my wine compass, if you like.

The key to a successful wine is focusing on mouthfeel.

100% agree again. Aromas and flavours are easier to build into a wine than mouthfeel or structure/architecture. Mouthfeel allows the wine to stand the test of time.

For many winemakers, wine is as much a part of their lifestyle as their profession. Is that the case for you?

It's very easy to become drawn into winemaking to the extent that it takes over one's life. The lines between work and socialising around wine can easily blur, so for me it's paramount to have balance. That's why I love getting away from it all in my 4-wheel drive.

In Europe they tend to call winemakers 'winegrowers', which acknowledges the role of terroir, and fruit quality along with winemaking skill. Should we be using this term more in Australia?

'Winemaker' is a peculiar word as wine is made by a team of people. Winemaking is only half the story, as site and the farming approach are equally important. It's about the entire picture, from vine to bottle, so yes 'winegrower' seems more appropriate.

What are your early impressions of Katnook Coonawarra and the region? What do you like and what are you hoping to work on in the first instance?

At any winery, a winemaker is a caretaker – one who respects the body of work left by others and takes small steps to polish, rather than making radical changes. In this regard, I am mindful of the incredible legacy left at Katnook by founding winemaker, Wayne Stehbens.

The Katnook vineyards are a fantastic asset, 'real Coonawarra' on the prized red strip of earth. Katnook has an incredible history stretching back to the 1860s and more recently, two Jimmy Watson trophies, Langton's classification listings and benchmark styles in Odyssey and Prodigy.

As for Coonawarra, I've been given a warm welcome by other winemakers. This is a fantastic winegrowing region because it is cooler and more reliable than many other parts of Australia. I find it interesting that Shiraz is not top of mind because it was the first wine John Riddoch made in the region, right here in the Katnook woolshed. Coonawarra Shiraz is exciting - rich with a juicy edge to it. The obvious space though is world class Cabernet Sauvignon and I can't wait to get started on that variety.

Which wine style do you particularly like drinking and why?

I love cooler climate wines in general. I go for wines made with a good degree of intellect, sense of place, balance and elegance – enjoyed with flavoursome food.

