

Henschke: 50 Vintages of “Hill of Grace” & New Releases



In the 1950s, there weren't many single vineyard, single varietal wines being bottled in Australia. When the wine industry wasn't focused on fortifieds, the preferred tippable of the time, this nation's vinous forefathers were largely convinced that the skill of table winemaking was in the blending of varieties, vineyards and even regions to produce a sum that was seemingly better than the parts and certainly more reliably consistent. In rare cases, such blending was justifiably an art (and still is). Maurice O'Shea, a true master-blender (e.g. his famed and somewhat idiosyncratic Shiraz / Pinot Noir blend) was, towards the end of his life in the early to mid-1950s, confirming his place in the hall of Australian winemaker fame with his now legendary and highly sought-after wines of that era. Max Schubert had just conceived of Grange: an uber-blend of superlative fruit from Penfolds' very best vineyards, which was admittedly derided in its formative years. But more frequently and, in retrospect, shockingly – this was a time when the precious offerings off parcels of prime-location, ancient vines were dumped in with largely innocuous fruit from the vast Riverland area and the like and blended to styles that borrowed names like “Burgundy” or “Claret” to suggest what may or may not be in the bottle. Not to be misunderstood, there were a number of glorious and long-lived wines bottled under these labels. But singular expressions of Australian place, time and person these blended wines were not, nor did their makers want them to be. What would be the point of such a wine?

“It was probably quite gutsy in those days even to focus on table wines,” current owner / winemaker Stephen Henschke commented as we commenced our tasting in March 2013, which included every vintage ever made of Hill of Grace. “My father Cyril only had a secondary school education,” he went on to explain. Though born into a family of mixed farmers of which grape-growing was but a part of the job, after a stint making wines in the cellars of Thomas Hardy & Sons, Cyril decided he wanted to focus on making wine. This worked out rather nicely since none of his other 11 siblings had taken any interest in the winemaking side of his family's agricultural ventures. Thanks to fate or maybe a stroke of good fortune, Cyril's brother Louis had a flare for viticulture, was one of the early proponents of organics in fact, and in 1951 momentously purchased a vineyard that had originally been planted by an ancestor of the brothers in the 1860s. This vineyard was in a few years to become known as Hill of Grace.



Mount Edelstone was, in fact, Cyril's first single vineyard, single varietal wine, initially produced in 1952. Following the early success of this label, in 1958 Cyril was encouraged to bottle the fruit from that clutch of mature-vine blocks recently purchased by Louis. Located in the small, remote Eden Valley area of Parrot Hill, directly in front of the Lutheran church of the original German settlers of this area with the tongue-

twisting name of Gnadenberg and next to the atmospheric ruins of an old post office, Cyril must have been presented with a number of valid name choices for his new wine. Perhaps understanding that a rose by any other name doesn't always smell as sweet, he opted for "Hill of Grace." It was a name that immediately captivated Henschke customers, as it does to this day.

Fast-forward twenty years to when, upon Cyril's death in 1979, current caretakers Stephen Henschke and his wife Prue took over the management of the Henschke winery. Following the death of Louis Henschke in 1990, they also took over the management of the Hill of Grace vineyard. This family's remarkable story – aspirations, experiments, successes and hardships – from 1958 to present has been captured and preserved in every bottle made of Hill of Grace. It is difficult to relate what an incredibly moving experience it was to be able to follow this progression of a true "terroir" wine through two generations and into the third, with Stephen and Prue's son Johann, recently returned from university and a stint in Europe, joining them at the tasting table. It made clear that a single vineyard wine can not only speak of a time, a place and a person, but in this case of a family. Cynics may balk, but I am convinced that beyond the hallowed ground upon which the fruit of Hill of Grace is grown, the precious planting material of mature and in some cases ancient pre-phyloxera vines, and whatever the vintage weather had thrown at that family, the lives and experiences of the Henschke family are present in each bottle. And it is opportunities such as this that give us further cause to reflect on the extraordinary nature of wine.

The Hill of Grace Vineyard

Hill of Grace is the quintessential Eden Valley Shiraz. Driving from the Barossa Valley up into the Eden Valley, the differences between the two areas are striking, and it is difficult to understand how they can be considered to be the same region (as they often are), apart from plain proximity. This area to the east of the Barossa is peacefully rural and altogether a lot less developed, hosting vast stretches of unscathed scrubland interspersed with gum trees and rugged, rocky hilltops. But the major point of departure is altitude – the warmer flatlands of the Barossa valley floor develop about mid-way through the town of Angaston into gently rolling, notably greener hills, soon giving way to the steeper slopes of the Barossa Ranges. Generally the region sits at around 400 to 500 meters above sea level compared to the Barossa Valley at around 200 meters. This makes the Eden Valley considerably cooler than the Barossa, tending to yield more firmly structured Shirazes with taut, muscular fruit in youth and often with a faint, fragrantly herbal, sage-like lift to the aroma/flavor profile.

The land where the Hill of Grace vineyard is now located was first planted to vines sometime before 1860 by a local farmer known as Nicolaus Stanitzki, an ancestor of current caretaker Stephen Henschke on his grandmother's side. Located in the Parrot Hill area of the Keyneton township, it sits across from the Gnadenberg Church, an original and well-maintained 150+ year Lutheran place of worship where the Henschkes are members to this day. In fact 'Hill of Grace' is a translation of the German word Gnadenberg, a region in Silesia, Germany. Once a bustling center of a burgeoning community, this part of the Eden Valley is now relatively remote, possessing a bucolic and, yes, spiritual serenity.

Johann Christian Henschke, Stephen Henschke's great, great grandfather, arrived from Germany to South Australia in 1841. He was known to have planted a small vineyard in the 1860s with his son, Paul Gotthard, most likely purely for production for the family at that time. Then in 1873, Paul Gotthard took over his father's estate and in 1891 he purchased the piece of land near Gnadenberg Church, which would later become known as the Hill of Grace vineyard. In 1914, his son Paul Alfred took over the estate, and in 1950 one of Paul Alfred's sons, Cyril Alfred, took charge of the management of the winery. Cyril's brother Louis Edmond purchased the yet unnamed Hill of Grace vineyard in 1951 and assumed management of this precious parcel for more than 40 years. Today the Hill of Grace vineyard is owned by Audrey Henschke, who was married to Louis. It is managed by Cyril's son Stephen Henschke and his wife Prue, who have a sharecropping agreement with Audrey and her children.



Stephen and Prue Henschke

The first “single vineyard” bottling of Henschke’s Hill of Grace Shiraz was done by Stephen’s father in 1958. Cyril Henschke could be considered something of a visionary with his concept to move away from fortified wine production, as was popular in his time, and focus on the development of single vineyard wines – first Mount Edelstone in 1952, followed by Hill of Grace six years later. But if he was the idea-man behind Hill of Grace’s rise to glory, Stephen and Prue have to be credited for the hard graft behind the execution of its continual improvement and intrinsic greatness today. The amount of research, experimentation, massal selection, plantings and improvements instilled by this dynamic duo is simply astounding. Their position as caretakers for the Hill of Grace is taken very seriously and includes painstaking changes among the ancient vines, such as converting the more vigorous vines to vertical shoot positioning or Scott Henry trellising, use of biodynamic principals and the sewing of cover crops. The wines are made as naturally as possible, and while admirable pursuits such as lower sulphur levels in the past has resulted in some incidences of brettanomyces, the recent vintages are remarkably pure and free from such blights – in many ways, better than ever.

The Hill of Grace vineyard is about eight hectares in size, planted predominately but, rather surprisingly, not exclusively to Shiraz. Shiraz accounts for about seven hectares separated into blocks according to vine age and soil type, but there are also small blocks of Mataro, Semillon and Riesling. The white grapes are used in the Eden valley varietal wines. The Mataro usually has problems ripening sufficiently, though occasionally it is included in the Hill of Grace blend. Interspersed amongst the old Shiraz vines are a few vines of Cabernet Sauvignon and even some yet unknown cultivars, which are field harvested and add to the unique nature of this wine.

There are six distinct Hill of Grace Shiraz blocks that commonly go into the Hill of Grace Shiraz:

Grandfathers (0.69 hectares planted in 1860) **Post Office Block 1** (0.51 hectares planted in 1910) **Post Office Block 2** (0.57 hectares planted in 1965) **Church Block** (0.74 hectares planted in 1952) **House Block** (1.08 hectares planted in 1951) **Windmill Block** (0.88 hectares in 1956)

There is also a seventh block of Shiraz planted in 1989 known as **Post Office Block Young**, which is destined to one day make up part of the Hill of Grace blend, but thus far it has not been considered worthy of inclusion.



A 150+ Year Old Vine from the Hill of Grace “Grandfathers” Block

During a previous visit in 2011, Prue took me through the differences she has noted in the soil compositions of the separate blocks. The Grandfathers Block and Post Office Block 1, for example, are planted on a deep silt soil profile mixed with some of the red-brown earth that extends more deeply into the Church block, and it possesses good water holding capacity. At 150+ years of age, the Grandfathers’ vines are simply a wonder to look at – thick, twisted, gnarled stumps that enjoy this Lazarus awakening each spring, bursting every vintage with eternal youth and the most incredible fruit – “exotic” as winemaker Paul Hampton describes it. Consisting of such senescent, dry grown, pre-phyloxera vines on their own rootstocks, this block alone is undoubtedly one of Australia’s greatest living treasures. This is contrasted against, say, the larger House block, planted nearly 100 years later on a thinner, far less vigorous soil and which tends to ripen considerably earlier than Grandfathers, yielding notably smaller bunches of tiny berries by comparison.

Though the six aforementioned Shiraz blocks are nearly always present in the Hill of Grace wine each vintage, not all the fruit from each block is used. For example, the fruit off the Windmill Block is rarely used in its entirety, as it can have a distinct herbal or leafy streak that could overpower the other components if not used judiciously.

The Vintages

1950s

The first two vintages of Hill of Grace, 1958 and 1959, were simply a joy to taste. They held up remarkably, and I couldn't help but imagine I could taste the determination, vision and indeed hope that Cyril must have born while making these wines. "1959 was my father's dream year," Stephen reflected, "an exceptional vintage."

1960s

Though no Hill of Grace wine could be made in 1960 due to the severe drought conditions and the ensuing raising of grapes on the vines, I generally found the wines of the early part of this decade to be quite exciting, kicking off with the graceful, pretty and effortless 1961 vintage. Stephen remarked, "1962 was a stand out for us. For me, making Hill of Grace was based on the '62 vintage." This was indeed looking very fine, but even more captivating for me was the 1965, with this "dry vintage" yielding a more concentrated, multi-layered wine offering tons of ever-lingering fruit even with 40+ years of bottle age. Worth mentioning is that some of the wines from this decade and moving into the 1970s and 1980s showed a bit of brettanomyces characters in the background, though this generally was not what I would consider overwhelming or even detrimental to quality in these incidences (though this is largely dependent on individual acceptance / intolerance of brett's by-products). 1969 was a vintage with a lot of mildew. Winemaker Paul Hampton referred to a tell-tale "ammonia and cheese rind" character. "I think I would have preferred the 1969 wasn't bottled," Stephen conceded. "It wasn't a good year."

1970s

"The first cooling system was brought in for the wines in the 1970s" Stephen mentioned. "It was at least a way of overcoming the problem of hot fermentations. There was also major move (at Henschke) in the '70s towards smaller oak – hogsheads." Previously Cyril had matured the wine in "big oval barrels between 250 and 500 gallons in size, for two or more years". He went on to explain, "No 1974 was made – it was a shocker of a vintage. I'd been working in the Hunter and my father said I brought the Hunter weather back with me."

Another noteworthy occurrence within this decade was Stephen's formal education in winemaking, which also introduced him to Prue. In the early 1970s, Stephen and Prue met at Adelaide University while studying there, graduating in 1973 with degrees in biochemistry / botany and botany / zoology respectively. They then furthered their knowledge of winemaking and viticulture together at Geisenheim University in Germany before returning home to assist Stephen's father.

Frankly, I was least impressed qualitatively with this bracket of wine from the 1970s, but nonetheless fascinated by the story revealed in the glasses. There were some interesting and even provocative wines, but many didn't truly have the stuffing to stand the test of time, and viewing them in isolation and in consideration of intrinsic quality factors alone, there were no real "highs" for me. Given the earlier triumphs from this vineyard and some of the glowing reports from the Henschkes on the overall quality of the vintages (apart from 1974), I suspect these leaner / less opulent wines were more a consequence of winemaker decisions such as yields, harvest date, level of extraction and general winery hygiene than victims of time and place.

1980s

With Stephen and Prue taking over the winery following the passing of Cyril in 1979, the 1980s represented a new chapter in the Hill of Grace story. "The 1980s was a 'see what we can do' decade and in the 1990s we took action," said Prue. From early in her education extending into the time when she came to Henschke, Prue had a passion and instinct for viticulture. It was during this decade that she worked with Louis Henschke, Stephen's uncle, to study the vines at Hill of Grace. Together they preserved the vineyard's most precious planting material with a massal selection of the blocks to create a nursery block of clones of the best vines for future generations.

Looking purely at what was in the glasses in front of me, the 1980s began much like the 1970s including a few disappointing wines such as the 1983 to 1985 vintages. Interestingly, of the 1983, a year when bushfires came dangerously close to the vineyard, Stephen said, "If ever we were going to have smoke taint, it would have been this vintage." I didn't note the tell-tale ashtray or smoked meat notes of smoke taint, but it wasn't one of the great vintages for this wine either. Toward the latter part of the decade the purity and power came back to the fruit with some exciting high-points such as 1986, 1987 and 1989. A cool, dry summer, Prue commented, "1986 was a perfect vintage for a winemaker."

1990s

"The 1990s was our decade of viticulture," said Stephen, "where Prue's influence came in." Prue added, "We started playing around with straw under the vines (as a mulch). The 1991 was a very dry year and it worked brilliantly. Then we started looking at compost. Now we're looking at the eutypa (a vine fungal disease also known as 'dead arm') issue. We've now managed to stall the impact of eutypa in our vineyards."

"These wines are showing beautiful tannins through the 1990s, there are no added tannins; it's all natural,"

added Stephen. He made particular note of the 1990, 1992 and 1996 vintages: “1994 quite mild, cooler seasons producing elegant, structured wines.”

As a final note on this decade, Stephen commented, “I didn’t like that bourbon character of American oak, so by the 1990s we changed over to French oak. Oak should be supportive, it shouldn’t be dominant.”

The 1990s presented an incredibly exciting decade’s line-up for me. The 1990, 1991, 1994 and 1999 are benchmark wines for this vineyard, demonstrating a power that comes from intensity rather than weight, exquisitely framed and with all the perfume and complexity one comes to anticipate of this remarkable place. A faint touch of brett characters came through on a couple of the wines, and while I wouldn’t go so far as to scream ‘fault!’ in these cases, the presence did come across as a distraction, especially alongside other examples of jaw-dropping purity.

2000-2008

“No 2000 vintage made because it was a shocker,” Stephen confessed. “We lost the Shiraz to unseasonal rains. We couldn’t make wine off what we could ripen after the rain.” And alas, here again is the difficult trade-off presented by the pursuit of single vineyard wines.

After the initial 2000 vintage hiccup, however, from the 2001 to the pre-release tasting of the 2008 Hill of Grace, the Henschke’s didn’t miss a beat. In my book, every single wine represented a commendable expression that was true to each vintage so far in the 2000s. The 2005 – thanks in part to near perfect growing conditions – is about as good as Shiraz gets. But even the more difficult vintages of 2003 and 2007 showed absolutely admirably.

“The 2000 decade really carries on what we started in the 1990s,” Stephen remarked, “trying to perfect the balance that we had. Looking at balance, structure and purity of fruit,” he smiled, shaking his head, trailing off with tears swelling in his eyes. Indeed the end of the tasting was an emotional moment for all who attended. I felt as though I’d just finished a beautifully written biography, and yet the 48 wines we tasted conveyed all the history and characters involved with the Hill of Grace vineyard with far more vividness than mere words could have ever described. And herein lays the point of this wine.

Note that parts of “The Hill of Grace Vineyard” section of this article were taken from another article I had previously written in February 2012 for In Asia-Pacific on eRobertParker.com, entitled, “Henschke Hill of Grace.”

—Lisa Perrotti-Brown, MW