



100 Years On

Does Morrie Bissil, a long-time resident of Bendigo, remember where the Granite Rock Hotel stood? Christ no! He laughs; "I'm only 76!" Morrie does know, however, where the first vines were planted at Big Hill.

"There are clues, if you know how to read the land, that point to early European settlement in the vicinity of where the winery stands today. A group of almond trees or a lone mulberry tree here; brick foundations there; a granite quarry further on and heavy slabs of granite scattered around the property. Some of the granite mined there was used to build the old Bendigo jail, and according to Morrie a vineyard was owned and planted some time after 1854, by a settler named Wolf".

"There was also a hotel there in the old days", he says, called the Granite Rock Hotel. "It was only a little shanty in those days. If you went in spring you'd find lilies growing among the brick foundations, but if you scratch around you might even find stables and watering holes. It was there before the land was subdivided in 1854, and my mother's grandfather lived in the vicinity. The vines were planted where the power lines are now, and you can still find the bumps where the bays (rows) were".

Nick Cugura, one of the partners, who owns Big Hill, agrees. "Morrie took us out there, and it was quite a ride", Nick said. "The bumps were as plain as anything. They've even been ploughed over a couple of times, but you can still see where they are". The old technique of growing the vines on mounds was called 'trenching'. Those original vines were pulled out late in the 19th century when phylloxera ruined them, trenching to keep their roots drained or no trenching. It's taken modern grafting techniques onto phylloxera-resistant rootstock, as well as a renewed interest in Australia and overseas in fine Australian wine and good food to get the vines replanted at Big Hill. And what's more, they won't be producing just Victorian wine - they will be producing central Victorian wine. "You can really taste the difference in central Victorian Shiraz", Nick says. "It has a distinctive taste - almost peppery - and that's all due to the granite soils, the sun, and the slow ripening times for the Shiraz and the season here".

It's one of the intricacies of producing wine in this region. Everything plays a role - the amount of sunlight, the microclimate and, of course, the soil. It's more than 100 years since they first picked grapes at Big Hill, and after a long break, the harvest is about to come in again. The mainly Shiraz grapes at Big Hill are growing heavy and dark on the vines, and will soon be picked and sent to Hanging Rock for their conversion into wine.

An early wine writer named Ebenezer Ward wrote of the vineyards established around Bullock's Creek in 1864 'I found that the vineyards, large

and small, in the neighbourhood of Bullock Creek, were more numerous than I had anticipated ... most of the vines are eight or nine years old and the fruit is of good quality'. While some things, like the quality of the fruit produced at Big Hill, remains the same, other things change. Mr Ward also wrote: "It would be premature to hazard the opinion that the establishments in this locality are generally inferior to those of the immediate basin of Bendigo ... but I have not derived the same favourable impressions". He'd be gobsmacked today.

Visitors to Big Hill can sit out on the comfortable balcony overlooking the rose gardens, drinking wine and enjoying a gourmet meal in the cafe, overlooking 4500 vines. The special events have started to kick in, with an authentic New Orleans dinner, which was spicy, hot and great fun. The next ones lined up are an Italian night on 18 March, and for something even more exotic than New Orleans, a West Indies Calypso night on 15 April. In the meantime, the winery is open to bookings for functions such as weddings, conferences and birthdays.

But for now, everyone's eyes are on the grapes and Big Hill's first harvest since the time Ebenezer Ward rode the mail coach out of Bendigo. Morrie Bissil has a bit to say about the state of the soil there, and it's the old-timers, more often than not, who can run rings around the young fellas with their hi-tech soil testing devices did a bit of digging out there at one time and I got a few bottles, Morrie said. "It's a nice bit of ground". And that's as good a recommendation as any.

Andrew McKenna, March 2000