



THE STORY OF GRANGE

BY MAX SCHUBERT





So much has been spoken and so much written about Grange Hermitage over the years that, as its originator, I welcome the opportunity of adding my own measure to the volume that has gone before, particularly as the spoken and written word has not always been laudatory but often quite distinctly the reverse.

Grange Hermitage has always been a controversial and an individual wine. It is my belief that if these two characteristics can be combined, then at least half the ingredients necessary for success have been achieved.

Grange Hermitage has been argued and debated around countless dinner tables. In its early years it was insulted and classified among the lowest of the low – yet, through all this it has stood out as an individual wine with its own particular personality and has been consumed in copious quantity whether it be with praise and pleasure, or with dislike and condemnation.

It has been almost unbeatable in wine shows, whether it be in the young vintage classes or the old open classes, having accumulated since 1962 some 126 gold, 76 silver and 42 bronze medals, plus 28 trophies and seven championship awards. It has even won two Jimmy Watson trophies, which is surprising as it is not the type of wine that usually wins Jimmy Watson awards – not because of its quality, but because of its style.

It is a truly controversial wine, never without interest and always open to debate one way or another. How, then, did an individual wine of this nature come into being?

It was during my initial visit to the major wine-growing areas of Europe in 1950 that the idea of producing an Australian red wine capable of staying alive for a minimum of 20 years and comparable with those produced in Bordeaux, first entered my mind. I was fortunate to be taken under the wing of Monsieur Christian Cruse, one of the most respected and highly qualified wine men of the old school of France at that time, and he afforded me, among other things, the rare opportunity of tasting and evaluating Bordeaux wines between 40 and 50 years old which were still sound and possessed magnificent bouquet and flavour. They were of tremendous value from an educational point of view and imbued in me a desire to attempt to do something to lift the rather mediocre standard of Australian red wine in general at that time.

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The method of production seemed fairly straightforward, but with several unorthodox features, and I felt that it would only be a matter of undertaking a complete survey of vineyards to find the correct varietal grape material. Then, with a modified approach to take account of differing conditions, such as climate, soil, raw material and techniques generally, it would not be impossible to produce a wine which could stand on its own feet throughout the world and would be capable of improvement year by year for a minimum of 20 years. In other words, something different and lasting.

The grape material used in Bordeaux consisted of our basic varieties, namely Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Malbec, and these were used in varying percentages to make the Bordeaux wines. Only Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec were available in South Australia at the time, but a survey showed that they were in such short supply as to make them impracticable commercially – after all, the development of a new commercial wine, particularly of the high grade range, depends on the quality and availability of the raw material, the maintenance of standard, and continuity of supply.

I elected to use Hermitage or Shiraz only (which was in plentiful supply) knowing full well that if I was careful enough in the choice of area and vineyard and coupled that with the correct production procedure, I would be able to make the type and style of wine I wanted. If necessary, I could always use a small percentage of Cabernet or Malbec from our own Kalimna Vineyard in the Barossa Valley as a balancing factor to lift flavour and character. As it happened, this was not necessary – at least, not in the early Granges.

It was finally decided that the raw material for the first experimental Grange Hermitage would be a mixture of Shiraz grapes from two separate vineyards and areas consisting of Penfolds Grange Vineyards at Magill in the foothills overlooking Adelaide and a private vineyard some distance south of Adelaide. I had already observed that both vineyards produced wines of distinctive varietal flavour and character with a great depth of colour and body weight, and felt that by producing them together, the outstanding characteristics of both vineyards would result in an improved all-round wine eminently suitable for my purpose.



Accordingly, during the 1951 vintage, the first Grange experimental wine was made, incorporating five new untreated oak hogsheads which I had observed were used to such good effect in France and other European countries. The objective was to produce a big, full-bodied wine containing maximum extraction of all the components in the grape material used.

The procedure to be employed was first to ensure that the grape material was sound and that the acid and sugar content was in balance consistent with the style of wine as specified. Using the Baumé scale, this was to be not less than 11.5 degrees and not more than 12 degrees with a total acidity of not less than 6.5 and not more than 7 grams per litre. With strict attention to detail and close surveillance, this was achieved.

The grapes were gathered and crushed and the must – consisting of skins, seeds and other solids comprising the fleshy part of the grape – and juice were pumped into a 12-tonne open concrete fermentation tank. During this operation, the must received a dose of sulphur dioxide, to neutralise the wild yeasts, and also an injection of pure yeast culture previously acclimatised to the level of sulphur dioxide used. The tank was filled to the exact level required. Boards, known as heading-down boards, were placed across the surface of the must in the open tank, with a narrow gap between each board. These were secured by two strong pieces of timber placed across the boards and locked in position underneath four lugs built into the upper tank walls. Fermentation began almost immediately and as carbon dioxide gas pressure developed, the juice was forced through the narrow gaps between the boards, keeping the skins and other solids completely immersed underneath the surface.

Although this was all fairly basic, it was important in achieving complete extraction during fermentation particularly, if viewed in conjunction with other procedures which followed. For instance, it was thought that in order to obtain full extraction, a much longer period of fermentation and skin contact would be required, necessitating strict fermentation control. This was to be achieved by controlling the temperature generated by the fermentation, on the basis that the lower the temperature, the slower the rate of fermentation, since there would be a considerable reduction in the heat generated by the yeast in its

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frantic efforts to multiply and convert the grape sugars into alcohol. Of course, vice versa, by allowing the temperature to rise, an increase in the fermentation rate would result. Temperature control was to be achieved by incorporating a heat exchanger in the process.

The actual fermentation rate in this case was governed by the predetermined length of fermentation, which was set at 12 days. This required a fermentation sugar conversion rate of approximately one Baumé degree per day. A further measure of control was achieved by using a graph system which showed the ideal fermentation line over a 12-day period compared with the actual fermentation line, which was governed by daily temperature and Baumé readings of the fermenting juice. A glance at the graph immediately showed the degree of cooling or heating required to maintain an even daily rate of fermentation over the period stipulated.

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I had previously determined that to assist in obtaining full extraction it would be necessary to separate the fermenting juice from the skins by completely draining the tank. This would cause all the solids, including the heading-down boards and cross pieces, to settle on the bottom of the tank. Then we would pump the juice back over the top so that it would percolate through the skins and other solids, thus extracting further essentials in colour, flavour and character. As the tank filled, the head-boards would rise on the surface until they were again locked into position by the cross pieces. It was a comparatively simple matter to incorporate a heat exchanger in this process, using salt brine as the coolant to achieve temperature control as indicated by the graph.

Fermentation proceeded slowly but evenly and the development of colour, body and character was extremely interesting. As the process approached its end, I decided that extraction from the solids was sufficient and that no useful purpose would be served by prolonging skin contact.

The fermenting wine was a beautiful rich, dark, ruby red already showing above average body, bouquet and fruit flavour. In addition, a general slowing down of fermentation, which is normal during the latter stages, meant that temperature was no longer a problem, and cooling could be dispensed with. In fact, a slight increase in temperature was desirable at this stage as an



encouragement for the flagging yeast to complete the conversion of the remaining sugar into alcohol.

The wine was then separated from the solids for the last time, a portion was transferred to the five new untreated oak hogsheads, and the remainder to a 1000 gallon (4550 litre) well-seasoned dry red cask. This was to be the control wine used to measure the success or failure of the new experimental hogshead wine.

The solids which were left in the fermenting tank were removed and pressed and the pressings stored in small seasoned casks holding 30 gallons, or about 140 litres. This would be used later on as a topping-up wine, to keep the containers filled to the brim at all times. Topping-up is a preventative measure against bacterial infection, and also makes good the removal of lees or deposits which accumulate on the bottom of containers during the self-clarification process following completion of fermentation. It was also intended to use the pressings as a balancing medium for the experimental wine before bottling, if required.

The experimental hogsheads were stored in underground cellars where the temperature was constant at 15°C and fermentation was completed in 12 days as previously determined. Within a month, vast differences became apparent between the experimental hogsheads and the control cask. Whereas the control wine showed all the characteristics of a good, well made wine cast in the orthodox mould, the experimental wine was strikingly different. The volume of bouquet, comprising raw oak mixed with natural varietal fruit, was tremendous. These characteristics were also very apparent on the palate. The overall flavour was much more intense than the control, and for a big young wine, the balance was superb. To my mind, even at this early stage, there was no doubt that this wine would be different, with almost unlimited potential if handled correctly.

During the months that followed, treatment was confined to the removal of lees from all containers, including the control cask, and the addition of small amounts of tannic acid. After 12 months, both wines were crystal clear, with superb dark, full, rich colour and body – but there the similarity ended. The experimental wine was bigger in all respects. It was a big wine in bouquet, flavour and balance. The raw wood was not so apparent, but the fruit characteristics had become pronounced and defined, with more

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than a faint suggestion of cranberry. It was almost as if the new wood had acted as a catalyst to release previously unsuspected flavours and aromas from the Hermitage grape.

I was delighted with the result of the experiment so far. To my mind, the marriage of all components had taken place and it required only the sealing of all these wonderful characteristics into bottles for the marriage to be consummated.

After a total wood storage of 18 months, and without any further treatment, the wine was bottled and binned away in underground bins where the temperature was more or less constant at 15°C.

Several hundred dozen of the control wine were also bottled and, while it developed into an exceptionally good wine in the orthodox manner, it never reached the heights of the first experimental Grange Hermitage. It did, however, set the guidelines for the production and marketing of a whole range of special red wines which have been sought after, vintage by vintage, to this day.

In the meantime, the 1952 vintage had come and gone with an increase in quantity production of Grange Hermitage, using the same raw material and method of production with similar results. It was a superb wine to my mind.

A variation occurred in 1953 in that, in addition to Hermitage, a straight Cabernet Sauvignon from our Kalimna Vineyard in the Barossa Valley was made experimentally, employing the same method of production as for Grange. The quantity made was five hogsheads as in 1951. The decision to make an experimental Cabernet at all, despite the shortage of this variety, was influenced by the fact that in 1953 the analytical balance of the grapes was similar to that laid down for Grange.

To obtain balanced Cabernet, at least in my sphere of operations at that time, was rare, and while the volume of flavour and character of the finished wine was usually magnificent, the imbalance of the fruit invariably manifested itself on the palate with a noticeable break in the middle and a thinnish, hard, astringent finish. However, this was not so with the 1953 vintage and I still rank this wine as one of the best Grange-style wines made.

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As vintage followed vintage, the accumulation of bottled stock grew and the improvement shown in the earlier vintages was all that I had hoped for. Gone was any suggestion of raw wood, and a complete wine was emerging with a full, buoyant, almost ethereal nose of great intensity and a palate which was full of rich flavour and character. The balance in every vintage, I thought, was near perfect. The time appeared to be ripe to remove the wraps and allow other people to see and evaluate this wondrous thing.

Besides, my superiors at head office in Sydney were becoming increasingly aware of the large amount of money lying idle in their underground cellars at Magill.

Representative bottles from each vintage from 1951 to 1956 were called for, and a wine tasting arranged by the then managing director. Those invited included well-known wine identities in Sydney, personal friends of the board, and top management. The result was absolutely disastrous. Simply, no one liked Grange Hermitage.

It was unbelievable, and I must confess that for the first time, I had misgivings about my own assessment of Grange. However, I was determined to prove the Sydney people wrong and, with the help and support of Jeffrey Penfold-Hyland, who was then Assistant General Manager of our South Australian operations, numerous tastings were arranged in and around Adelaide and at Magill. We availed ourselves of every opportunity, donating various vintages to wine and food societies, Beefsteak and Burgundy Clubs, and wherever wine drinkers congregated. However, the general reaction was little better than the earlier disaster in Sydney.

It may be illuminating at this time to record some of the assessments made by experts and critics alike in public and in my presence during the darkest hours of Grange Hermitage. Some of the remarks were downright rude and pained me no end:

“A concoction of wildfruits and sundry berries with crushed ants predominating.”

This, by a well-known, respected wine man.

“Schubert, I congratulate you. A very good, dry port, which no one in their right mind will buy – let alone drink.”

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Then there was the smart person who wanted me to give him a couple of dozen. He was not going to pay for it because he did not think it was worth anything. Another very smart one wanted to buy it and use it as an aphrodisiac. His theory was that the wine was like bull's blood in all respects and would raise his blood count to twice the norm when the occasion demanded. A young doctor friend even thought he could use it as an anaesthetic on his girlfriend. I could go on, but I think that will give you an idea of Grange's initial reception by most people at that time.

There were, of course, some notable exceptions, whose faith in Grange never wavered. They were people such as Jeffrey Penfold-Hyland, without whose support Grange would have died a natural, but not peaceful death, George Fairbrother, that doyen of wine judges, Tony Nelson, at that time managing director of Woodley Wines, Douglas Lamb, who needs no introduction from me, and Dr Max Lake who, I recall, either purchased for a song or consumed most of the 1953 experimental Cabernet himself.

There were others who would not commit themselves, but preferred to wait and see. At least they did not condemn and were prepared to give the wine a chance. To all these I offer my gratitude.

The final blow came just before the 1957 vintage when I received written instructions from head office to stop production of Grange Hermitage. The main reasons given were that I was accumulating large stocks of wine which to all intents and purposes were unsaleable and that the adverse criticism directed at the wine was harmful to the company image as a whole. It appeared to be the end.

However, with Jeffrey Penfold-Hyland's support, I disregarded the written instructions in part, and continued to make Grange in reduced quantities. Finance was not available to purchase new hogsheads, but some benefit was gained by using hogsheads from previous vintages. This undercover production continued through to 1959 and the wines made, although good, lacked that one element which made the difference between a good wine and a great wine.



In all, it was 10 years from the time the first experimental Grange was made before the wine gained general acceptance and the prejudices were overcome. As the earlier vintages matured in bottle and progressively became less aggressive and more refined, people generally began to take notice, and whereas previously it had been all condemnation, I was now at least receiving some praise for the wine. A little of this filtered through to my board of directors, with the result that just before the 1960 vintage, I was instructed to start making Grange Hermitage officially again, with ample funds available for this purpose. Since that time, Grange Hermitage has never looked back.

In 1962, after many years' absence from Australian wine shows, the company decided again to take part in these competitions, and Grange was first submitted as an entry in the Open Claret class in the Sydney Show of that year. It was awarded a gold medal. This was the 1955 vintage which, in my humble opinion, was one of the best Granges ever produced. This wine won more than 50 gold medals, until its retirement from the show arena in the late 1970s, not because it was defective in any way – in fact, in 1977 it was awarded the trophy for the best dry red in the Melbourne Show – but because my board wished to give later vintages the opportunity of winning or adding to the number of gold medals already won.

In retrospect, the 1950s were exciting years of discovery, faith, doubt, humiliation and triumph. The 1960s were rewarding years of contentment in the knowledge that the continued making of Grange was in good hands.

I wish to pay tribute to the many winemakers, technicians, cellar managers, senior cellar hands and vineyard supervisors who, over the years, so ably assisted me in the making of Grange. Each one had a part to play in every vintage made, and even though I always retained absolute control of all stages of Grange production and, indeed, company production generally, without their help, support, interest and co-operation, it would have been almost impossible for me to cope, particularly in the later years before my retirement in 1975.

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I would also like to express the hope that the production and the acceptance of Grange Hermitage as a great Australian wine has proved that we in Australia are capable of producing wines equal to the best in the world. But we must not be afraid to put into effect the strength of our own convictions, continue to use our imagination in wine-making generally, and be prepared to experiment in order to gain something extra, different and unique in the world of wine.

Taken from a paper delivered at the first Australian National University Wine Symposium in Canberra in September 1979.

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