

Oz Vintage Experience 2011:

I find it hard to sum up my experience in the Barossa Valley of South Australia during the 2011 vintage. Thanks to the efforts of the Communicating for Agriculture Foundation, the CA Education Programs and Bibber International, I was able to make my dreams of conducting a harvest and working with Australian wines a reality. I spent my first week in Glenelg, South Australia at the Backpackers Hostel near the beach. The weather was beautiful and the people I met were very helpful and friendly to a neophyte backpacker/traveler. I began the week by meeting some of the others in the Bibber program whose backgrounds ranged from Portugal, Italy, and California. Sue, Sally, Mandy, Jacinta, and all others from Bibber made sure our first week in Australia would be a memorable and learning experience. We had a barbeque the first night which had some Emu and Kangaroo on the menu and of course, some great South Australian wines to pair. After a couple of days of meeting, learning, and trying to ease into the Aussie state of mind, I departed from the others and we all went to our new temporary homes within greater Australia. My location was in Tanunda. A small, rural farming based community about 70km north of Adelaide in the “mighty” Barossa Valley.

During nearly four months in this area not only did I gain a great deal of knowledge about how they make their wines and why they do what they do in the process, I also had many chances to learn the local culture and assimilate (as much as I could) into the local scene. Tanunda was not a big place by any means, with just about 3,000 residents, it was big enough and small enough to get to know a wide range of local Australians. They were curious of my background and why I had chosen to come there, though with this being the Barossa Valley, they had seen their fair share of vintage goers in and out of town for years. With every one of us, there’s a new story I guess. I felt comfortable in this town, met some great people and shared a lot of stories in exchange for some of theirs.

As it pertains to the work I was there to do, the winery that chose to have me for vintage was an “all hands on deck” type of place. Stanley Lambert Wines, a once joint venture between an Aussie family and an American family was now under total control by the American half. This would be the very first vintage that Kirk Lambert, winemaker, would be able to call his own. We were a very small operation through the vintage. It was merely myself, Kirk, and his friend and true Aussie “mister-fix-it”, Jasen. As if this wasn’t the smallest team I had ever worked with for harvest, we had one of the most challenging vintages in nearly 40 years. Before I had even gotten to the Barossa, I had heard rumors of record rainfall and cooler temperatures making the season last longer and longer, eventually pushing harvest time back almost an entire month. Then, as soon as the grapes were beginning to fully ripen, the heavy rains and cloud-cover came back. They drenched the vineyards and set mold, mildew, and botrytis on nearly every vineyard around. As the farmers said, “it was a vintage from hell”!

Good or bad, Kirk was determined to make wine from this vintage no matter what and that’s just what we did. Against the odds and the nay-sayers we processed around 80 tons of white and red grapes from the Lamberts estate vineyards. As we watched the progress of the fermenting wines and tried to keep them in control we realized that our white wines were turning out to be somewhat unique in aroma and

had wonderful flavors regardless of the grapes rough season. As for the reds, we had made a few small batches and kept everything separate for the fermentation process. We monitored these wines until the day I left and most looked as if they had a lot of potential.

Through it all, I learned how to make wine in a truly challenging year. This experience will always be remembered and the stories will carry on throughout my life. I plan to be returning to the area next year to do it all over again. The people were great, I made some true friendships, and learned/experienced more than I could have ever imagined. Truly a great time.

Cheers,

Ryan Rugg, C.S.W