

Enduring Family Heritage Fuels Lifelong Passion



Image credit: Elfes Images.

It was 38 years ago that Robert (Bob) and Maryanne McLeish established McLeish Estate when they planted Semillon and Chardonnay on their 16-hectare property on DeBeyers Road, Pokolbin, in the Hunter Valley. Their incredibly successful story continues today, with their daughter Jessica now at the helm and steering the family business into a bright future.

The great family tale, with a definite Scottish flavour, began when Bob's father emigrated from Kilmarnock, south of Glasgow, Scotland when he was just a boy. The family settled in Sydney and maintained their Scottish traditions, with Bob learning the bagpipes from a young age and becoming a gifted piper and teacher of the instrument. This Scottish heritage is important to the family, and celebrating their culture has since become central to the estate's image, branding and events.

Bob began his working life as an engineer and first-grade rugby union player. He spent a lot of time in Adelaide and discovered that the wine was better than the beer in South Australia. Along with his Newcastle-born partner, Maryanne, the two developed a passion for wine and an interest in the industry. With the plan of a quieter life and being closer to Maryanne's family, they purchased the current property in 1985. They learned the industry from the ground up, working alongside Noel Martin as the Vineyard

Manager. By 1990 the cellar door was opened, and their reputation as winemakers of exceptional wines was well on the way to being established.

In the years since, the winery has developed a global reputation of excellence, winning the prestigious trophy for one of the World's Best Semillons three times, in 2012, 2013 and 2016. The single vineyard winery produces quality and varietal purity that has seen it awarded over 300 accolades with over 60 Trophies, 76 Gold, 60 Silver and 80 Bronze since its inception. Over the course of 38 years, the vineyard expanded the range to six varietals, including Semillon, Verdelho and Chardonnay, along with Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz, whilst evolving into an undisputed international leader for Hunter Valley Semillon.

In 2020, Bob decided to retire and felt that the business was in very capable hands with his daughter Jessica who grew up working in the vineyard and has been part of the business all her life.



Image credit: Dom Cherry.

"I have a wonderful relationship with Dad, who lives on the property," said Jessica.

"I see him most mornings, and because we're a family business, it makes sense to use him as a sounding board. We often catch up over coffee or wine. He's got all that historical knowledge and helps with the long-term visioning for the business and ideas for the winery."

"Growing up in the Hunter Valley, through the 90s on a mixed farm (cattle, vineyards, horses, wheat) and working with my Mum and Dad in the vineyard as a child, seeing them plant and establish a vineyard/cellar door means that this industry is almost second nature to me. I really started getting interested at 17, working at the vineyard before and after school.

"Initially, I followed a path into Human Resources, then took on a stint at Chateau Carsin, a bio-dynamic producer in Rions, south of Bordeaux, France. When I returned to Australia, I graduated in 2014 with a Masters of Wine Business, then completed the Advanced Wine Assessment Course (AWAC) in South Australia and started judging at wine shows locally, nationally and internationally."

It was her time on the judging circuit that gave Jessica ideas about how to deliver best-practice wine-tasting experiences to the cellar door customers. Jessica felt that the pairing of food and wine enhances the wine-tasting experience and so set out to deliver the highest quality produce to complement the single vineyard wines.

There are now several different wine-tasting experiences on offer at the Cellar Door, with an expanded range of Hunter Valley produce that customers can purchase, creating their own packs and tasting boards. Picnics, barbeques, helicopter rides, fireside chats, history and education, are all available as part of the suite of cellar door experiences.



Image credit: Dom Cherry.

Developing ways to enhance the wine-tasting experience has led to the establishment of several very popular events, and this year, Jessica is excited to be offering a unique workshop that repurposes what already exists in the vineyards – the canes.

The Wreath and Wine workshop utilises vine cuttings to make your own Christmas wreath and includes wine tasting and grazing plates. Participants learn how to design and construct their own festive vine wreath with renowned Australian designer and creator Naomi Findlay using wreath weaving and decorating techniques. Taking place in winter on 24 June and 1 July, it's a beautiful time in the vineyards as the vines are pruned, and the cuttings repurposed. The workshop will emphasise the use of sustainable and natural materials, and the team will be helping to create a fun, creative and relaxing afternoon with more than a touch of the festive spirit. The cost is \$145pp, and you can take home your very own handmade wreath.

The absolute highlight of the McLeish Estate annual events calendar is the Hunter Highland Lunch, taking place this year on Saturday, 16 September. Bringing together the best Scottish traditions and local Hunter Valley wine and produce will be a fitting celebration of all things Scottish.

The day will begin at 11am, with performances by Maitland Pipes and Drums, and highland dancers and guests are welcome to participate in the traditional caber tossing competition. Attendees will then be treated to a three-course feast paired with current and museum-release wine from McLeish Estate. The cost is \$180pp, and early bookings are essential.

It was during Covid that the family took the opportunity to renovate and expand the interior spaces of the Cellar Door. The interior design takes inspiration from a wine oak barrel with exposed brick walls, concrete floors, warm timbers and cosy furnishings creating a rustic and convivial atmosphere. Outdoors visitors can enjoy vineyard views in the seated pergola area with a backdrop of the Brokenback Mountains or take advantage of one of the barbeque areas with an 'Enjoy the Grounds - BBQ & Vineyard Range Tasting' where you enjoy a seated wine tasting experience before being given full access to the grounds and barbeque facilities.

With over 30 wines featured in the cellar door, including the multi-award-winning World's Best Semillon and iconic aged reds, quality is guaranteed. McLeish Estate specialises in the classic Hunter Valley varietals, all the fruit is handpicked, and the wines produced are single vineyard with the exception of Sauvignon Blanc, which comes from Orange.



Image credit: Dom Cherry.

The family's commitment to the Hunter Valley and belief in the wines that come from this terroir is evidenced in the hard work that both Bob and Jessica have provided as a part of the Hunter Valley Wine Growers' Association. For over the past decade, Bob has been on the board of the association, and Jessica has worked on a number of committees across marketing and promotion, the Hunter Valley Wine Show and the Hunter Valley Legends Awards.

"It's important for us to give back to the industry we love," said Jessica.

"It's one of the reasons that we enter the large-scale international awards. Many small producers like us don't bother, but by doing so, we've been able to put the Hunter Valley on the global map – particularly where Semillon is concerned. The Hunter Valley has now become synonymous with Semillon. Of course, we didn't do that on our own, but by entering the international awards and being awarded World's Best Semillon three times, we certainly helped, and we're proud to be able to share that recognition with our local industry."

The biggest challenge for any wine grower in the Hunter Valley is, of course, the weather and how it affects the fruit, and this year has been no different.

"With each new vintage that passes, I just wish I was able to predict what mother nature has in store for us in the Hunter!" said Jessica.

"But I guess that is what makes wine and the wine industry so exciting - how we move through the seasons, and each year tells a different story."

"During La Niña, we had the wettest spring in ten years and cooler and milder conditions into January, so we've had to be extra diligent in our vineyard management. Fortunately, we had a lovely window of 30-degree days to allow for ripening and varietal flavour to develop, and the gap in the weather was the perfect opportunity to hand-harvest the estate whites – classic hunter Semillon, Chardonnay and our everyday drinking varietal Verdelho.

"I am very pleased with the flavour of the whites. Leading into February, vintage flipped to being beautifully dry, warm summer days, which produced the perfect seasonal conditions across all red varietals. This year, the Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon colour and flavour brightness are exceptional."

All of which sounds very promising for this year's vintage of McLeish Estate wines. Striving for quality, not quantity, the winery maintains its exclusivity and control of the brand by only selling through the cellar door, wine club or at select fine dining restaurants. Don't miss visiting this cellar door with the very Scottish flair on your visit to the Hunter Valley. Its wines are literally among the world's best.