

Michael Glover: Wine philosopher back on home soil

A free spirit, rebellious, eccentric. Michael Glover has been described in many ways. Perhaps the most fitting would be passionate. Early this year, the New Zealand born winemaker completed a 10-year stint at Bannockburn in Victoria and returned to his roots in Nelson. Emilie Reynolds caught up with him to find out why, after two decades in Australia, he decided to go home.

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WITH A REPUTATION for being one of the most brilliant big thinkers in the wine industry, it should come as no surprise that Michael Glover has been surrounded by wine his entire life. The love was fostered by his parents, who would often indulge him in a small glass from special bottles, but it was two wines in his teenage years which saw him fall head over heels. Glover remembers two wine epiphanies clearly: 1976 Weingut Milz Laurentiushof Auslese when he was 15, and 1979 Chateau Malartic-Lagravière when he was 18.

“Those two bottles were my first great white and red wine moments and undoubtedly planted the seed for the love of drinking wine,” Glover explained. “Looking back now I also realise that, in helping my father plant his small vineyard when I was 15, a kind of bonding occurred.

“There was a commitment and a connection to a place and a plot. Part of me was planted in the land with those vines. Something special happens when you then make wine from a particular place that you feel a part of. You are expressing your connection with the land. It is your expression and nobody else’s.”

As time ticked on, Glover found another passion in competitive road cycling from the age of 14 to 24, winning national championship medals and representing New Zealand at international level.

“It was great as a teenager when you’re full of ‘promise’ and ‘potential’, but once you get older you have to start delivering,” Glover said.

“When I got to my early twenties I was training five hours a day and I wasn’t winning nearly as often. I was losing my joy for being on the bike and I realised that I just wasn’t tough enough to ride

as a professional in Europe (I’m sure my phobia of needles and blood certainly didn’t enhance my prospects).

“At the same time I was watching winemakers from all around the world visit my parents and eat good food and drink great wine. There seemed to be an air of camaraderie, adventure and fun. The ‘spirit’ of wine filled the air!”

Glover said with each moment and each bottle, the calling to be involved in the making of wine grew stronger.

“I hung up my bike and returned to Australia in 1993 to complete a Wine Science Degree at Charles Sturt University,” he said.

Throughout his four-year winemaking degree, Glover was able to complete vintages at The Rothbury Estate in the Hunter Valley before heading back home to New Zealand for vintage at home with his Dad.

“In 1998, upon completion of my degree, Rothbury employed me as an assistant winemaker that then became operations winemaker after six months. From 1999 to 2000 I moved a bit further down Broke Road from Rothbury and was the winemaker at Oakvale. I loved working in the Hunter and I still treasure my brief time working with Hunter Shiraz and Semillon, surely two of Australia’s more quixotic wine styles,” Glover said.

The opportunity to make wine at Moorilla Estate in Tasmania arose in late 2000, enabling Glover to return to a cool climate.

“Whilst at Moorilla I began to question what was deemed normal or traditional and began departing from accepted winemaking protocol,” Glover said. “I surreptitiously began toying with whole bunches, extended lees aging and wild ferments... the madness and adventure had begun.”

After leaving Tasmania and Moorilla, Glover took on the role of winemaker at Bannockburn Vineyards in 2005, a position he held until the beginning of this year.

“I know I left Bannockburn Vineyards a different winemaker to when I started there almost a decade earlier,” Glover said, although he believed his most memorable role was still to come with his Mammoth Wines project.

“One of the great things that I learned at Bannockburn is the importance of time. It is a wonderful thing to have time to think, time to reflect and time to let the wines evolve into something ‘more’. “The wine I hated leaving behind the most when I left Bannockburn in January of this year was a 2011 Chardonnay that I had kept on lees for four years. I was intending to bottle half of it after five years and the other half after seven years on lees.

“I have often thought that a lot of what I was taught at winemaking school was really about speeding things up. No time, so add packets yeast; no time, so add fining agents; no time, so de-stem.

“Time is what separates wine from beverage.”

Glover said there were lots of reasons why he decided this was the year to leave Bannockburn and return to New Zealand, but none more important than the connection he felt to his home land.

“I guess if you go back to what I said before about a connection to a place then the truth is I feel connected to New Zealand,” Glover explained. “I have always referred to it as ‘home’ – my sense of place. I guess it was always my intention to one day return to Nelson.

“My wife and I were four days away from signing papers to build a house just out of Bannockburn when the phone rang asking me if I wished to return to Nelson to take the winemaking job at Mahana. It was like a train stopped at my station and the conductor said if you want to go home and make great wine you had better get on now as the train won’t be stopping again.

“I also felt that I had achieved almost



Michael Glover embraces his 'wine spirit' throughout the winemaking process to ensure he enjoys every minute.

as much as I could at Bannockburn. After more than nine years of work the brand was once again relevant, interesting and exciting."

Glover said despite the success he was achieving, it felt to him as though his creative freedom was beginning to dry up at Bannockburn.

"Success wasn't allowing freedom but restricting it: 'It works and it's selling so don't change it!'" Glover said. "The reason to stay all centred on the themes of safety and security and yet from a winemaking point of view safety and security is the enemy. I really needed new winemaking challenges."

Settling into life in Nelson has been a different story all together, according to Glover, with many changes since he last lived there.

"It does feel like I have moved to a new place rather than returned home," he said. "I had forgotten (or probably just didn't appreciate) that Nelson is a small region, in a country in the farthest corner of the world. The wine industry is safe...

perhaps even a little conservative."

Despite the traditional wine community, Glover admitted Nelson was a beautiful region.

"You cannot underestimate the importance of beauty to enrich and nourish the soul – something has to feed the spark of creation and for me it is life.

"It is the flowers, bees, birds, rivers, mountain tops, horizons, stars, sunsets and sea that make me happy. The best wines I have ever had have been in nature, whether it be by the river, on top of a mountain, in a cabin, at the seaside. That is where great wines really sing.

"Wine has never been about restaurants and 'fine dining' for me. You can't get the best out of a great bottle in a sterile space made of artifice and façade. This is like owning a Ferrari and only driving at 60 km/hr to the corner store.

"If you want to get the best out of a great bottle you must take it to the race track... you must go outdoors into the arena of life. I have asked this question many times to wine people: 'What does

wine mean to you?' To me wine is life enhancement.

"Wine has the ability to make things even better. Wine can make the meal in front of you exquisite; it can enhance the most spectacular view; it can reward the toughest climb, and it can even make the person sitting opposite you more appealing... if used with care and caution of course (my wife will be cross with that one)."

Glover said Nelson has incredible winemaking assets, namely the yellow ultic soils of the Moutere that allowed for viticulture free of supplementary irrigation, as well as the rolling hills and myriad of tiny valleys that allowed for huge site expression in a very close area.

"Combine these soils and sites with the Nelson climate and you get Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling knocking at the winery door with perfect numbers and great difference. Terroir. No need for additions."

Glover said as a winemaker, he then has the chance to paint a personal ▶

expression of how he sees the region.

"A pure expression. An honest expression. The brown orthic soils of the Waimea plains are only 15 minutes away but allow for, and give, a totally different Nelson expression."

Glover said the great 'old world' wine regions were founded on the simplicity of a vine in the ground and whether or not it could survive and produce great fruit for great wine.

"Back then, there was no irrigation, no pH meter, and no shiny foil packets of 'stuff'. The great Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat once said, 'technology is shit, and is only there as a back-up for mistake after mistake'. I believe this.

"If you've planted the wrong variety in the wrong region on the wrong site you then need to irrigate and dump acid into your ferments to get out of trouble and stay in the game. Not my scene."

Glover said the wine he made under his own label Mammoth in 2013 proved that Nelson could make "bloody good" Pinot Noir from dry grown fruit with no addition of enzyme, yeast, tannin, colour... nothing but a bit of SO₂.

"For me, personally, this is nirvana. You are making something that has integrity, is pure and, dare I say it, authentic. There is huge potential to make truly great wine."

Glover said his first vintage back in Nelson has proven to be "thrilling, terrifying, tiring, fun and frustrating all at the same time."

"Vintage doesn't change much. Wherever you are it always has the same wonderful smell and electric energy in the air. It is a time of birth and creation and a faith and trust that the wine gods are smiling and are with you. I think they felt kind – the wines look great."

Although a couple of blocks were frost affected, and a few more had some botrytis present, Glover didn't seem phased.

"I had nearly forgotten what botrytis even looked like but then, even botrytis represents life," he said. "I'll take botrytis any day of the week ahead of drought, heat and shrivel which, to me, represents death."

Glover said throughout the winemaking process, there were all sorts of interesting things going on in the winery.

"Sauvignon Blanc was fermented on skins and on stalks. The use of Che-Glovera® bespoke cigar barrels, acacia puncheons and then there was the mad Lahar-Ferm® 100 per cent lees ferment, though incredibly difficult to explain, it was the craziest thing I have ever done and it worked!"

Glover said all of the white wine

madness makes the 100 per cent whole bunch Pinot Noir look positively conservative by comparison.

"Almost all of the fruit that has come in this vintage has not received a single addition since it was picked... not even SO₂."

According to Glover, almost all ferments he has watched over for the past 10 years have relied on the local yeast squadron to hop in and do a good job.

"I haven't inoculated a tank in a very long time," he said. "There is something nice about a whole lot of friendly yeasties arriving at the winery on the back of grapes freshly picked and calling to their yeastie mates who are lurking in the winery roof to come down and join in the sugar fest.

I have asked this question many times to wine people: "What does wine mean to you?" To me wine is life enhancement.

"Yeast packets belong in refineries. The vacuum sealed foil packets always remind me of the terminator... relentless, robotic and without soul."

Mahana Estates has been certified as organic since 2011, and has used biodynamic practices in the past but Glover said obtaining cow manure that was organically certified has proven to be very difficult.

Glover admitted he had been critical and sceptical of biodynamic practices due to the practices of who he liked to call 'false prophets' in Australia.

His ideas began to shift when he recently listened to James Millton speak at the NZ Organic Winegrowers Conference in Marlborough.

"I was very impressed, even moved, by the way he was able to articulate and express a love of his land and a way of life in wine that was quite spiritual. He seemed to have a totally different take on things from almost every other soul in the room.

"This certainly resonated with my belief in 'wine spirit'. I do have a translation of Steiner's agricultural lectures sitting in front of me, and I'm still struggling and far from convinced, but I cannot deny that anything that espouses life, creativity, spirit and difference I find very appealing and attractive," he said.

While there's no denying that Glover has a different point of view and has no

issue in voicing it, when asked why he believed he had a reputation of being a rebel winemaker, he simply said he wasn't.

"I don't think I am rebellious," he said. "My deep and philosophical 'wine-Buddha' answer to this question is all about context and perspective.

"At first, making a batch of wine using 'different' or 'alternative' methods may seem brave, mad and terrifying but once you understand and commit to what you are doing and what you believe in, then at some point down the road you look back over your shoulder and see how far you've drifted from the pack," he said.

"It is then that you realise that everyone else seems to be quite tapered or fixed in their vision of things. This is enlightenment for me.

"My short 'non-Buddha' answer is that I just try and make wines that I would like to drink."

Still settling into his old home town, Glover said he has bonded with a few locals who epitomise the characters of a good winemaker.

"I have enjoyed tasting and visiting with Andrew Greenhough, who is a thoroughly good man of the Nelson 'old guard'; whilst Neudorf winemaker, Todd Stevens is a very good chap also," Glover said. "They are both open, honest, enthused and possessing a sense of occasion with an excellent bottle always in hand."

Beyond wine, Glover's squad consists of Simon Nicholas, brewer at Hop Federation, cider maker Alex Peckham, local bee keepers, Pic the peanut butter maker, and the team at the famed Upper Moutere Takeaways.

"Nelson is full of interesting characters," Glover said.

As far as the future goes, Glover's thoughts were as optimistic and impassioned as ever.

"I think we are on the brink of some really exciting times," he said. "I like to think that we are unshackling the cultural cringe of the past and bravely heading down our own paths as Australian and New Zealand winemakers.

"We need to continually pursue, improve on and perfect our own ways of doing things. There are whole vistas of flavour, aroma and texture waiting to be discovered.

"The days of a producer clinging to the 'old world' to legitimise and give blind meaning to their lack of direction and vision are, surely, nearly at an end.

"The future is all about reflecting our respective places in a new world. Unique wines reflecting unique places and made by unique individuals. I can't wait!" **GW**