

# When MONA met Moorilla

Posted on 09 July 2014. Campbell Mattinson – THE WINE FRONT

Hey. MONA. Indeed. Art gallery. Near Hobart. The building drilled like the ribs of a supermodel into a tiny peninsula on the Derwent River. Ghastly, ghoulish, provocative. Official name the Museum of Old and New Art. On the quiet side of a quiet town but in a few years it's hummed Tasmanian tourism into a chatterbox. It's 'out there'; if any of the gallery's exhibits/installations prove to be too popular, plans are made to take said exhibit out; the MONA experience is supposed to challenge and disrupt, not pander. If you want a bandwagon, tune in to Channel NINE.

MONA. The baby of a man named David Walsh. He built and funded it all on the back of elaborate, systematic, Not-Like-Rain-Man gambling on the gee gees. Parked in the head spot at the gallery is a Merc with the numberplate "God". Parked beside it is a sportier Merc carrying the numberplate "God's Mistress". MONA used to be called the Moorilla Museum of Antiquities before a lazy \$75 million was spent on a renovation. Take that, The Block. The spruce up warranted the new name. The whole place, not surprisingly given the dagger and dare of it, nearly went broke in 2011/12 when a \$35 million dispute with the Tax Office stabbed it in the heart. Fear and Loathing on the Derwent: Walsh bet the whole damn lot one crazy Tuesday in November via a massive multi-channeled bet on the Melbourne Cup. Come Wednesday morning, they all still had a job.

How do you sell such a place? Put a billboard at the airport with the heading: SEX AND DRUGS.

Now for the interesting bit.

MONA isn't just on any old peninsula. It's on the site of the oldest or most iconic name in commercial Tasmanian wine. Or so it should be known.

Moorilla. Two peninsulas, a mini and a major isthmus. These fingers of land known locally, as a pair, magically, as Small Frying Pan and Large Frying Pan. You could fry East and West Egg in them.

It's easy for newcomers to Australian wine to miss the historical significance of Moorilla. But if you were to step back 60 years – step back to the mid-1950s – there'd be no such thing as a bottle of Henschke Hill of Grace, Lake's Folly wouldn't yet have been hatched, Maurice O'Shea would still be strutting

his legendary stuff, and Penfolds Grange would still be a hidden experiment. In short, the modern catastrophe of Australian wine wasn't even yet a glint in some will-be-legends' eyes.

And yet Claudio Alcorso, a scholarly chap from Italy with a penchant for creating, manufacturing and appreciating the detail of textiles and fabrics – works of art of their own kind – started Moorilla on this stunning little waterside plot in the depths of southern Tasmania over 50 years ago. It's a fact worthy of an exhibit in MONA.

In Alcorso's own words – taken from his auto-biography:

“When I casually mentioned my intention of planting a vineyard, all my Tasmanian friends told me that I had no chance. Their reaction was automatic: South Australia was right for vineyards, therefore Tasmania must be wrong. They could not think that the reverse might be true, that South Australia might be too hot for making wines of good quality, to drink with meals. It is worth mentioning that similar prejudices were strong 2000 years ago, when viticulture expanded from the hot, traditional regions of Greece and southern Italy, to Gallia and to the Rhine.”

Whenever there's a spark of history in Australian wine, look around to see if David Wynn is holding a match. In 1958, there he is again: he packed 90 cuttings of riesling from his vineyard at Modbury and shipped them to Moorilla. 90. Beautiful.

So there was an Italian living in Tasmania in the late 1950s growing the German grapes he called Rhine Riesling.

Sheer intelligence and sheer good luck. Claudio. The late 1940s. His first experience of the Moorilla peninsula: “I walked across the main road up to the top of the hill where the orchard stopped and the casuarinas covered the banks. From there the site of the river was marvellous. The land would be of no interest to farmers: it was too small, there was no water for irrigation, the soil was poor and there was some erosion. But it was a lovely place for living, open to sunshine and better sheltered than the fashionable residential shores downstream.

“This was the land,” he quickly realised, “which became the focus of my life and the anchor to my new country.”

Claudio, who had done military service in the Veneto, fell deep for the place. He built a family and an extraordinary house there. It had a patio made of King Billy Pine with she-oaks in the background. He “grubbed out the old fruit

trees and planted green crops to be ploughed back". He employed two brothers, named Guido and Ottavio, to work the land. Guido stayed several years and "by the time he left, the land was in order: soil erosion had disappeared, the paddocks were covered by luscious grass". The estuary ran past, bringing with it "cool afternoon sea breezes". Claudio's biography is titled "The Wind You Say."

"In 1971," this biography tellingly marks, "my son Julian graduated in economics, married and moved to Sydney where he soon started his own business making fashion shoes. It looked as though he and his family would stay in Sydney forever until one Christmas when ... he confided that he liked the idea of dedicating his life to the vineyards and winery."

The move of Julian Alcorso to Moorilla is its own story but all the while the spirit of the Moorilla land infused the soul of Claudio. "The search for a haven, a search all migrants pursue and not many find, has ended. The bonds that tie me to this land are as light as a caress; I am home."

And then, in 1995, he lost it. Moorilla went into receivership. The establishment of a new vineyard – named St Matthias – in the north, on the Tamar River, part of the financial over-stretch.

The killer detail: David Walsh, the gambler man, the art freak, lived across the river from the Big Frying Pan land and drank of Moorilla pinot noir, as you would, as he bubbled up schemes to outsmart Wrest Point casino (which ended up banning him), and of course way beyond. The pinot was good but more importantly, the house was a better place to stash his blossoming art collection than his own.

When Moorilla went into receivership he put in a "stupidly low offer". The bank handed him the keys. It's arguably taken Walsh a long time to get his head around the place. In the past 19 years winemakers have been switched like bets. In short, through no fault of any individual, quality, style and direction has been all over the shop. People have been known to groan when they've seen a Moorilla box arrive on their doorstep. Particularly me.

Until, that is, Conor van der Reest rocked out of Canada to take the job. He's been there seven years now. His passion: "The reason I got into winemaking was sparkling and champagne." He's a strict, meticulous, line-and-length man. He's overseen a cut in Moorilla's production by 70 percent; got himself a spanking new glittery winery; and for the first time in a long while, all the wines are estate grown (on the Derwent and at St Matthias) again. It's a new

beginning at the end of a long journey.

And yet, of course, there's a madman at the MONA tiller. Moorilla is just a pair of nice shoes to the main suit of the gallery. Whether or not it can step out from beneath this tourism-magnet hem and cut into the consciousness of real world fine wine; that's the challenge. Hey. MONA. Move over. I'm Moorilla. Oooh.

**CLOTH LABEL LAUNCH** When owner David Walsh mentioned that he wanted a reserve range Conor van der Reest openly admitted that he cringed at the thought. Moorilla wasn't ready and besides, he'd always struggled with the concept of reserve wines and their impact on other wines in the range. But when he got to thinking and working on it more, he thought – if we do make a reserve range, it must mean something more than just a 'best barrel' grab from the core range. It must honour the past. And it must help tell the story of what we are about.

The old Moorilla labels in the 1960s and 1970s were made with cloth. Alcorso was of course a textile expert. The new labels therefore are made with cloth. Twenty percent of Moorilla Estate is from the Derwent Valley, the rest is from Moorilla-owned Tamar Valley/St Matthias vineyard.

St Matthias was planted in the mid 1970s. It's planted with all manner of varieties, and "all of them do well". So Conor asked, what can i do that shows what this vineyard can do?

Connor had worked in champagne and also in Chateauneuf. He was well used to blending multiple varieties.

So he decided he would make: a late disgorged sparkling wine. Another sparkling wine. One white wine. And a red.

**2004 MOORILLA CLOTH LABEL LATE DISGORGED SPARKLING** \$145 11.3% 140 dozen production Saw this twice: first presented as a rich, heady, musky style. Wild bucks may well try to mate with it. Rose petals, honeysuckle, strawberry, spiced wood, Turkish delight. So delicious. For all its exotic dance notes it offered a dry, chalky sophistication as you swallow. It billowed around in its luxury but then raced through the finish. It's very low in dosage; it smells and tastes sordid but then an overwhelming dryness applies a strict discipline. Second bottle, freshly opened: dry, young, racy, unevolved as a ten year old. Common ground:

quality, and great length. 94/100

**2012 MOORILLA CLOTH LABEL WHITE** \$110 13.4% 160 dozen  
production One white. Tells the story of the vineyard. Based on the whites of the chateaneuf, in concept rather than variety. Made with pinot noir (fermented first), then gewurztraminer, then riesling, then pinot gris, then chardonnay, then sauvignon blanc. Conor uses the ferments of each grape to start the ferment of the next pick, the next variety. The ferment effectively rolls and gathers through the entire wine, its own story of the vintage. Each variety goes into barrel for a couple of months, is then settled back into stainless steel, and is then blended and assembled into one 1500 litre barrel. The wine: Gewurtz influence is clear in the wine. The wine is both fat and skinny, muscular and soft. There's grass, there are floral notes, there are smoky gunmetal characters, there's a build of alcohol and a cleansing flush of acid. It's textural, dramatic, interesting. There's a real phenolic grip to the finish, bordering on a bitterness. You wouldn't call it more-ish but you would call it captivating. Will polarise of course. As most fascinating things do. All texture, flash, flesh. Drink young. 91/100

**2012 MOORILLA CLOTH LABEL RED** \$110 13.4% 94 dozen  
production Conor: "I didn't want a light bodied red, or a full bodied red. It's somewhere in-between." It's made with pinot noir, shiraz, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, and riesling. There's some sexy, smoky oak here. Beautiful oak. Almost creamy, almost spicy, almost sweet and yet savoury. Tannic, spicy, musky, cherried, twiggy. Connor sees the riesling as helping to "bind the wine". You can see strings of flavour drawing down through the palate, imparting aspects of both interest and pleasure. There are tonic-like herbal notes, bordering on bitterness. There's perfume, spice, fruit, meat. Nothing is dense but nothing is too light. I don't know about the price, but the wine is beautiful to drink. 91/100