



Hamilton's Ewell Vineyards and Winery at Warradale are only seven miles from Adelaide. These vineyards were the first planted in South Australia.

Hamilton's - South Australia's first Vineyards

by Geoff Mitton

On June 7, 1837, a land grant was signed in London authorising the purchase by Richard Hamilton of a section of land at Glenelg in the new colony of South Australia. En route to Australia, Richard Hamilton obtained a batch of wine cuttings from Cape Town and planted South Australia's first grape vines just six months after Governor Hindmarsh had proclaimed the colony. The vines took root in the rich red-brown soil at Glenelg and by 1840 produced a grape crop sufficient to make domestic wines. Thus did he pioneer the industry for which South Australia is fondly regarded by wine lovers today. Richard Hamilton named his vineyards "Ewell" after his former home in Surrey. They were only two miles from Holdfast Bay where the State's first settlers had landed, and seven miles from Colonel Light's site for the City of Adelaide.

A considerable part of the vineyards remain at Glenelg today surrounded by Adelaide's south-western suburbs. It is a unique setting for grape vines amid the rush and bustle of suburbia. Pioneers then, the Hamilton family have since contributed several important "firsts" to the Australian wine industry as it has grown over 130 years. In 1929 they fermented white wines in 500 gallon closed wooden vats which gave them a lightness and delicacy unobtainable with the then accepted method of fermentation in open cement tanks. The development of Ewell Moselle from this method is

interesting. In the early years of the twentieth century, Frank Hamilton, a son of the founder, produced a chablis made from Pedro grapes grown at Glenelg. To ensure its keeping qualities, he added grape spirit making it a semi-fortified dry white wine.

Lightness and Delicacy

Whether this was the predecessor to Hamilton's Moselle or not remains unknown, but the Ewell Moselle was first made from Pedro grapes by Mr Sid Hamilton in 1929. He had been impressed by the lightness and delicacy of style of some 1927 French champagne which had been shipped to Australia by his brother Eric while on a business visit to London.

At this time Australian white wines — still and sparkling — were big in style and dark in colour as they were wood-matured in the same manner as Port and Sherry. At that time also, wines were fermented in open cement tanks which created oxidation and hygiene problems. In 1929 Hamilton converted some closed wooden storage vats to fermentors and produced the first Ewell Moselle. Great care was taken to pick the grapes early to retain some natural acidity and without too much sugar to assure that the wine would be delicate in style. At that time, this was a radical departure from the accepted methods of dry white wine making.

The quality of vintages varied considerably before World War Two because of climatic conditions, for there was no known method of controlling fermentation temperatures in our hot climate. Vintages of note in those years were 1931, 1933, 1936 and 1938. The latter wine was recently retasted in Sydney by a group of wine connoisseurs and found to be in excellent condition for a wine of its age. One comment was ". . . Very light in colour, soft delicate nose, full in palate, still showing acid . . ."

Refrigeration was first installed by Hamilton's in 1944, to ensure that temperatures were controlled in the wine making process. This enabled the Company to handle large quantities of all types of white wines successfully at each vintage, regardless of the climatic conditions at the time.

Flor Sherries

Fermenting wines with flor yeast — forerunner of the now popular flor



Some of the huge wine vats at the Warradale winery.

sherries — was pioneered by Hamilton's in 1913. On a visit to Spain in 1913, a Dr Harris of Rutherglen, Victoria, studied the use of flor yeast in producing sherry and brought some back with him for testing. A Russian winemaker called Seeck living in Victoria knew Dr Harris and when Seeck moved to South Australia in the early 1920's, he brought the flor yeast with him and gave Mr Sid Hamilton some to try. Flor sherry was thus introduced by Hamilton's in 1928.

Mr Seeck joined Hamilton's as wine maker in 1929 and remained with the Company until his retirement in 1941. His early life was a fascinating one. He was interested in wine as a young man and studied winemaking at Heidelberg in Germany for seven years where he became an expert on white wines. His first visit to Australia was in 1880 to survey the investment possibility in the pastoral industry in Queensland for a Russian syndicate. However, it is recorded that he cabled back — "better to put your money on a racehorse". Seeck remained in Australia until 1903. He then returned to Russia but came into disfavour with the Czarist secret police and fled to St. Petersburg where he was smuggled aboard a British ship and eventually returned to Victoria where he died in 1942 at the age of 83.

One of the important advantages of flor yeast over more recent imports is that it establishes itself quickly and the bouquet and taste of the wine are much more pronounced. Hamilton's still use the original strain in preference to the many types of yeast now

brought to Australia by the Australian Wine Institute.

Apart from Glenelg, Hamilton's have vineyards today at Springton and Eden Valley — familiar names near the Barossa Valley, and at Nildottie on the River Murray. A full range of superb wines is produced and an average vintage would yield more than 1,000,000 gallons of wine, brandy, whisky and other spirits.

Modern machinery has replaced the early equipment of the founders but the same care is followed at every stage of wine making.

Moselle

A wine of which Hamilton's are especially proud is their Extra Fine Moselle made from the Pedro and Verdelho varieties of grapes grown only at the Ewell vineyards, Glenelg. This fine moselle has the lowest alcoholic content of any white wine produced in Australia.

Winemaking at Hamilton's is in the hands of Maurice Ou, a Frenchman who has been with them for 21 years. Mr Ou learnt the skills of winemaking prior to World War Two in some of the great French vineyards at Limes, Bordeaux and Beaune. He spent the war years in British Borneo and was persuaded to come to Australia for "a couple of years" before returning to France. He is still here and has only seen France twice on overseas trips in 1951 and 1967. During the latter trip, Mr Ou toured the vineyards of France and Italy and returned to Australia with some very definite views on the

quality of our wines. They are definitely better than all but the very best French wines he says. An equivalent wine to our well known clarets would be quite expensive in the shops of Paris.

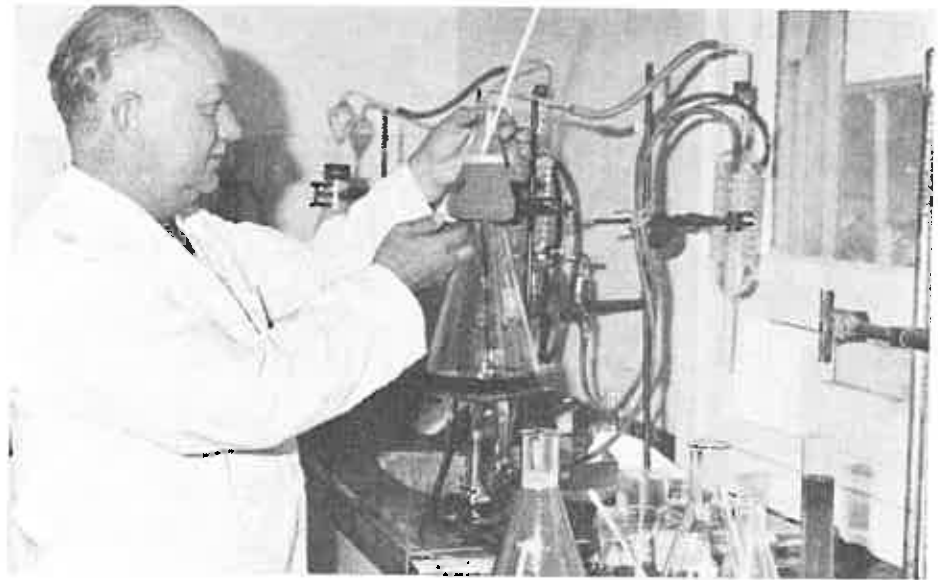
We have not yet been able to match the superb quality of the grand Chateaux of Bordeaux or the best Burgundies but in time this would be achieved with improved techniques, Mr Ou said.

From the original 80 acres granted to Richard Hamilton (the Land Order for which has been presented to the National Trust of South Australia) the area under vineyards at Glenelg and nearby expanded to a maximum of 156 acres.

Demands of Metropolis

Today, of course, the demands of an ever-growing metropolis have made it uneconomical to retain big areas of vineyards here and the present area under vines is only 45 acres. Not long ago, 30 acres were sold to the Education Department for a new technical high school. Hamilton's themselves have recently taken up a further area on which a 90,000 square feet warehouse has been erected. Here cartons of wine are stored on pallets and moved by fork lift trucks to big semi-trailers for transport throughout Australia.

As the Glenelg winery became too small to cope with increasing output,



Mr Maurice Ou, chief winemaker, learnt the skills of winemaking in some of the great wineries in France.

the production of fortified wines was transferred to Eden Valley on the eastern fringe of the Barossa Valley, in 1965. A 44 years-old winery was taken over and modernized to accept a grape intake of up to 3,000 tons. The purchase of 110 acres of land at Springton was made last year for planting new vineyards with Rhine Riesling, Frontinac, Grevache, Shiraz, Hermitage and Cabernet Sauvignon grape varieties.

As is the case with most Australian wineries, Hamilton's Ewell Vineyards remains a family business. Chairman

and managing director is Robert Hamilton, a great-great-grandson of the founder. His father, Eric Hamilton, was chairman for years until his death only a few months ago.

Apart from supplying a large home demand, Hamilton's wines are exported to countries throughout the world and have won many awards at international festivals. Thus do the descendants of Richard Hamilton continue to build on the heritage he planted for them in South Australia's first vineyards.