

John Seeck by Robert Hamilton

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Herewith a brief précis of John Seeck's life and career:

As a young man he was a member of the Czar of Russia's household guard but briefly before the Russian Revolution in 1917 he changed career and went to the Geisenheim Wine Academy on the Rhine in Germany and studied white wine making of the Mosel style.

He was not able to return to Russia and decided to migrate. He first of all worked in Spain and then moved onto Victoria, Australia and a Doctor Harris who had a small vineyard in Rutherglen together with a winery. (The Harris family are still in Rutherglen – but now they are lawyers).

He saw more opportunity in South Australia and in 1922 moved to Brighton, South Australia. Initially he got a job as a winemaker for Reynella Wines, but settled down on a system of three days a week at Reynella and two days a week at Hamiltons.

He brought one very important advance in winemaking technology to Australia – the system of making light fresh wines of low alcohol which could be drunk early (6 months old) - without wood maturation and showing the nose and flavour of the grape from which the wine was made. An add-on to all this was Syd Hamilton's engineering ability who designed a refrigeration plant which cooled the fermenting must to approximately 16 degrees Celsius after which the wines were in a specially constructed insulated cellar which maintained those wines at approximately 18 degrees Celsius until they were bottled.

At the same time it was normal practice in the industry to store their wines above ground in casks or vats for two years – at the end of which the wines were the colour of “tea without milk”.

Seeck played a leading part in all this as he knew very well the style of wine which we should aim for and this was embraced by Syd Hamilton – and so Ewell Moselle evolved and the basic analysis was 10.5 % Alcohol, 8 gms residual sugar and acidity of 7gms per litre.

Personally Seeck was a very big man, about 186cm tall, drove a Dodge motor car (with canvas top and running board and drank a half a gallon flagon of moselle a day assisted by a few beers at the Brighton Hotel on his way home from work. He retired in 1936 and

a few years later (age approx 82) after the death of his wife, went to live for a further six years with his daughter in the Western District of Victoria.

He had Helen and Eda (sisters) and a son John. Helen married Hugh Beggs and Tamara their daughter married Malcolm Fraser. Eda married Bob Barr-Smith and I don't know who John married.

The important thing of all of the above I think is that this revolutionized white wine making in Australia – the introduction of refrigeration, grapes being crushed at 10 to 11 baume instead of 15 to 16 baume. The only equipment missing was stainless steel tanks but this was compensated for by the manufacture of and use of 4500 gallon jarrah waxed vats which imparted no colour or taste to the wine – hope that this helps.

Robert Hamilton