

W I N E L I N E S

Tenacious dynasty

among the vines

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YOU wouldn't need an especially active imagination to persuade yourself that the Hamilton family has wine, not blood, flowing through its veins. For Richard Hamilton was not only one of South Australia's two founding winemakers, he was the first of six generations of vignerons who built a series of highly successful wine businesses.

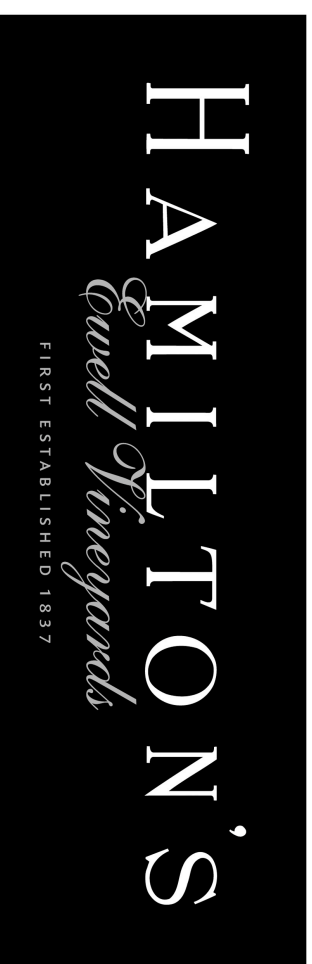
The cornerstone was Hamilton's Ewell Vineyards, established in 1837, the year the state of South Australia was proclaimed and the year Hamilton arrived in the colony. In June 1838, his land title was granted and he planted 0.8ha of vines at Glenelg later that year.

The business flourished: when Hamilton's widow Anne died in 1886, aged 90, management passed to his son Henry, then to grandson Frank, next to great-grandson Eric, and ultimately to great-great-grandson Robert. Other members of the family were also involved: Sydney Hamilton, born in 1898, worked with the company for 30 years before retiring in the mid 1950s. As much as any Hamilton, wine was in Sydney's veins, and 20 years later, aged 75, he bought a choice block of terra rosa soil in the heart of Coonawarra and planted 12ha of grapes on the vineyard he called Leonfield.

Having made the celebrated 1980 Leonfield Cabernet Sauvignon ("picked by experienced women", so the back label said) he yielded to family pressure and, aged 84, sold Leonfield in late 1981 to his nephew Dr Richard Hamilton, a medical practitioner who had started his own McLaren Vale-based winery in 1972.

When in 1979 Mildara made an offer to acquire Hamilton's Ewell Vineyards it was crushing 12,000 tonnes of grapes a year, and had a diverse range of wine interests and products. One was the Bridge-water Mill, now owned by Petaluma, another was a historic stone winery at Springton in the Eden Valley. Stonegarden, as it was known, had been built by Oscar Benno Seppelt in the 1850s, and was purchased by Sydney Hamilton for his company in 1945. He equipped it with (then) state-of-the-art winemaking equipment to make fortified and table wine from the surrounding 20ha vineyard, the Barossa and the Riverland.

In 1982 Robert Hamilton repurchased Stonegarden from Mildara, and for some years there was yet another Hamilton wine label. Then in 1991 yet another Hamilton, Robert's son Mark, an Adelaide lawyer, appeared on the wine scene, buying two historic Barossa vineyards, Fullers Barn (40ha) and Siegersdorf (39ha) from the financially troubled



Viticulture 2000 Fund which had been founded in the 1980s by Brian McGuigan.

In 1993 he and wife Deborah added the Railway Vineyard (35ha), Rohrtach (6ha) and Tweedies Gully (19ha), likewise long-established plantings. Another part of the loop was closed when Mark and Deborah acquired Stonegarden from Robert Hamilton, but the clincher was the repurchase of the Hamilton's Ewell brand and trademarks from Mildara Blass, which had discontinued using them.

In 1995 the Hamiltons leased their vineyard holdings to Southcorp for 10 years, but retained the right to take part of the crop, and hence have been able to relaunch the Hamilton's Ewell brand, albeit in a small way, distributed by Alepat Taylor (in Victoria), Festival City Wines and Spirits (South Australia) and Allied Vinners (ACT).

The range comprises a riesling, two chardonnays (one unwooded) and two impressive red wines, 1998 Railway Shiraz (88 points) and 1998 Fullers Barn

Shiraz (90 points) (the latter two \$26 each). These were contract-crushed in the Barossa Valley and taken to Stonegarden for maturation in new oak under the watchful eye of 74-year-old Robert Hamilton.

The Stonegarden Winery is gradually being brought back to full working life for a third time. Production now stands at about 10,000 cases, and while Mark Hamilton is quick to say he has no aspiration to reach the level of the old Hamilton's Ewell production, the vineyards (supplemented by a new project, the 80ha-and-expanding Limestone Quarry vineyard established at Wrattenbully in 1999) will be able to produce 2750 tonnes of grapes a year come 2005, when the Southcorp lease expires.

They're a tenacious and long-lived lot, the Hamiltons, and with a dash of family rivalry to add spice, we shall hear more of them in the years ahead.

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