

# Winemaker Profile

## JILL LINDSAY - LINDSAYS WOODONGA HILL – HILLTOPS NSW

It was the New South Wales Wine Show in 1997, and Jill Lindsay was pouring her wines for the wandering public. There should be some sort of bravery medal for winemakers at such shows, for their 'beyond the call' type of patience that is always required when dealing with the empty glass carriers, whoever they may be.

It was a busy venue, but I needed to ask "that" question. Where is Woodonga Hill? Quickly the realisation of this unoriginal question sunk in, as Jill patiently explained it is near the southern NSW town of Young, part of the Hilltops Region, and Barwang fame.

With this on board, it was to the safety of her wines, where they did the talking, and they do it very well. The conversation that followed released several points of interest, not the least being the raising of four children. Footage of new mother Gaetane Carron from Concha y Toro in Chile as seen in Jancis Robinson's BBC Winecourse were invading the thought processes. Images of Jill trudging through the vineyard with child on hip were projecting in my mind's eye.

Jill grew up in Cessnock, and worked professionally as an Industrial Chemist. Phill the other Lindsay, a Marine Engineer, comes from Newcastle. Both were Hunter devotees. 1975 saw Phill working on BHP's new ships program in Sasebo, Japan, where he also explored the wide range of available Californian wine during his leisure time! Returning home, a decision was made to spend more time with the family, and a government position based in Young with the Pipeline Authority was the result.

Destiny was attracting the Lindsays, as they became close friends with the Robertson family, Barwang's original owners. They were impressed with the first Barwangs, despite the lack of local interest. A trait often present, and curious to fledgling regional psyche, it seems.

"Basically the soils immediately adjacent to Young are considered best and have been responsible for the fruit flavours that the district is famous for. Its stone, pome and berry fruits." In addition the Lindsays chose Woodonga Hill as it fitted further, their criteria of elevation, drainage, northern side of town (better summer rainfall) and critically, it was available for sale. Main road frontage for Cellar Door access was a significant incentive.

Also known were the findings of the Gregory Report. The wine industry commissioned the Agricultural Department to determine what area would be the most suitable for grape growing. The Hilltops Region was Gregory's "hands down choice." The industry decided on the Upper Hunter. The weather plays strange tricks sometimes!

"Planting began in 1978. At the same time Jill began studying for her Oenology Degree at Wagga's Charles Sturt University (Wine Science). Working part time at Barwang she made some private bins of Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon. Constant travelling to Barwang was taking its toll. So they 'found' some tanks, bought a small crusher and concreted part of the machinery shed, "and a 'yo ho' here we go, helter skelter into becoming the 5<sup>th</sup> cellar Door in the Hilltops Region." The first commercial wines were produced at Lindsay's in 1986.

Phill, the over qualified cellarhand, a rating he will no doubt avenge, had his own unique contribution, not only to family. He would take contract work all over the country, on and off shore, as a way of financing the vineyard and winery.

At the time (1997), the Woodonga Hill Winery was the only surviving commercial winery in Hilltops. Nearby Cowra was endless vineyard, but no winery. As a consequence, Jill performs a significant amount of contract winemaking. This raises Phill's theory of the "Orphan Winery". As consumers, we are the beneficiaries of their survival. A nurturing consumption is the prescribed course of action. Historically there were several vineyards in the area, and there had also been 'shed size' winemaking operations. The survival rate is very poor.

The Lindsays knew they had their 'island in the sun', but still there were a number of forces working against them. A significant one as I learnt early on was the confusion of their "Hill" with the Albury Wodonga phenomena, hundreds of kilometres south west of their Woodonga!

All this culminated in various degrees of fatigue, and a name change to Lindsays of Woodonga Hill is the result. Their wines include: Rhine Riesling, Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Gerwurztraminer, Chardonnay, Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Meunier and fortified wines from Touriga and a liqueur from locally grown cherries.

The annual crush is about 160 tonnes. Well over 100 of these make up Jill's contract winemaking commitment.

In a Wine Growing sense, if you talk about NSW, people generally think of the Hunter Valley or the MIA. In recent years Mudgee and Cowra have evolved into the conversation. Small winemaking concerns are how and where a region begins. Continued success at the Competition Wine Shows, changes what was 'just taking notice', to investment by the larger companies.

The happening Canberra Region is the classic story, with BRL Hardy now heavily invested. It takes time certainly, but most importantly it takes people on the ground doing their thing in a creative and conscientious way to get a region through the early stages of its journey. There is plenty of evidence of this happening with Jill, at Lindsay's.

In the words of the Cellar Hand: "It is hard to write the Jill Lindsay story without a history of Hilltops. It is harder not to look at everything in the southwest slopes of NSW in the last 20 years, including the Lachlan Valley, without giving credit to Jill's achievements. A big percentage of the wines produced for the small vineyard 'Cellar Doors' were made at Woodonga Hill, and by her."

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