

Pinot tribute

This one's for Dad.



Drinks

Max Allen

It was a sunny day in March when I visited Gembrook Hill during vintage earlier this year. The place looked immaculate, as ever: the vineyard, established by Ian and June Marks in 1983, is one of the prettiest in the high, cool country of the southern Yarra Valley, with plunging rows of vines and beautiful, well-established trees, all fringed by bush.

Ian and June's winemaker son, Andrew, met me in the winery at the bottom of the hill, where he was testing the sugar level in a batch of grape juice. It was riper than he was expecting. Time to pick the pinot, he said.

Then we went back up to the house, with its sweeping views over the vineyard, to eat the lunch June had prepared using produce from the garden – cucumber soup, salad – and drink some of the latest releases.

It was a lovely lunch, and everyone was in fine spirits. June reminisced about a trip to France with Ian when they were younger, drinking too much cider, falling asleep in a haystack. She told stories of Yarra Valley winemaking luminaries including Reg Egan from Wantirna Estate and John Middleton from Mount Mary coming to help them plant their sauvignon blanc vines in the early 1980s.

But there was also a certain solemnity in the air. It was a year to the day that Ian Marks died of a heart attack.

"Dad used to spend hundreds of hours on the tractor," said Andrew. "That was his passion: the vineyard. Now we spend hundreds of hours on the tractor, making sure we're looking after the place as he would."

Ian didn't see himself as a winemaker. He was a viticulturist.

June Marks, Gembrook Hill

"Ian was different [from people like Egan and Middleton]," said June. "He didn't see himself as a winemaker. He was a viticulturist. It was all about the vineyard."

That's why, for most of the vineyard's existence, Gembrook Hill wines have been made by other people.

In the first few years the grapes went off to the Lance family's Diamond Valley winery. For the past decade and a half, Timo Mayer (who also makes wines from his own vineyard closer to the centre of the valley under the Mayer label) was responsible for turning the grapes Ian grew into Gembrook Hill wine.

That has changed now. Since last year,



Andrew Marks: 'We spend hundreds of hours on the tractor, making sure we're looking after the place as Dad would.'

Andrew Marks has taken on the role of chief winemaker.

He has always been very close to Gembrook Hill. As a kid, he helped plant the vines, and he remembers making wine in the garage at the family's home in the Melbourne suburb of Hawthorn in the '80s (he managed to slice his thumb open, he recalled, and ended up in Epworth emergency).

Andrew went on to study winemaking, and worked for Penfolds and did vintages in Europe for years before returning to Australia and the family vineyard in the early 2000s. He worked closely with Timo Mayer on the Gembrook wines, but the

place was still very much Ian's domain. "This was Dad's property," he said over lunch. "He wasn't ready to pass it on, to be frank."

So, a few years ago he established his own label, The Wanderer, and made wines using grapes grown elsewhere in the Yarra Valley. And he then set up The Melbourne Gin Company, helping to start the craft distilling craze in Australia.

Now, though, he can also add Gembrook Hill chief winemaker and viticulturist to his CV.

"This is a new beginning," he said. "Where I'm nominally in charge."

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All in the family: Ian, June and Andrew Marks at the picture-postcard Gembrook Hill.

He looked across at his mum and smiled. "Although June's the real boss, obviously."

After Ian died, Andrew and his mum decided to make a wine in Ian's honour. Called IJM and released this month, it was made using pinot grapes harvested from both the oldest vines planted at Gembrook by the Marks family in the early 1980s and a new patch of young vines planted by Ian a couple of years before he died. It's a beautiful wine and a fitting tribute to the legacy of a man who loved his vineyard. www.gembrookhill.com.au

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Tasting Gembrook Hill



2016 Gembrook Hill Pinot Noir [Yarra Valley]
Lovely pale-coloured, elegant pinot, reflecting its southern, hilly provenance: pretty floral perfume, vivid red berry fruit, fine, powdery tannins. One for the cellar. At a vertical tasting of Gembrook Hill wines earlier this year, the 2010 and 2006 pinots, from vintages similar to 2016, were both drinking superbly now, with plenty of development ahead. **\$55**
gembrookhill.com.au



2017 IJM Pinot Noir [Yarra Valley]
The pinot grapes from the 35-year-old vines at Gembrook bring a deeply savoury, silky quality to this wine; the fruit from the three-year-old vines Ian planted bring vibrant red cherry flavours. It's a great pinot and, being priced the same as Gembrook's other wines, it's also a democratic offering, considering its exceptional quality and limited production, **\$55**
gembrookhill.com.au



2016 The Wanderer Syrah [Yarra Valley]
For a few years now, Andrew Marks has sourced shiraz grapes from a vineyard in the north of the valley and made two different styles from the same fruit. One, labelled "shiraz" and fermented with a small percentage of whole bunches, is round and supple; the other, "syrah", is 100 per cent whole bunch and is finer, more elegant, spicier, more intense. The current vintage, 2016, is a particularly glorious example of the latter style. **\$55**
wandererwines.com



The Melbourne Gin Company Dry Gin [Yarra Valley]
Established in 2012, MGC was one of the first of the new wave of Australian gin brands, and is still one of the best. Andrew Marks separately distils 11 botanicals – including grapefruit and rosemary grown at Gembrook Hill – and blends them to produce a consistently high-quality spirit: bright, herbal, citrusy aromas, dry, woody-spice flavour and a lingering round juniper finish. **\$75**
melbournegincompany.com

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