



The *Change* Agents

MANY YARRA VALLEY WINEMAKERS HAVE HAD REMARKABLE CAREERS BEFORE BEING DRAWN TO THE VINE; AND CATHY PHELAN AND HUSBAND ANGUS RIDLEY HAVE MADE A FLAWLESS TRANSITION.

WORDS and PICTURES Helen Collier

THIS PAGE The view over the Sutherland Estate vines.
OPPOSITE PAGE Angus with dog Rosie and the award winning Tollana. Cathy in action teaching ballet.

“The elevation gives it magical views and a wonderfully cool microclimate conducive to premium quality fruit.”



Cathy

One of five children, Cathy grew up at the foot of the Dandenong Ranges and began ballet at the age of seven. Her lessons were held in a community hall not dissimilar to the rustic hall in the tiny Yarra Valley hamlet of Toolangi, where she now teaches the next generation of tiny ballerina hopefuls.

She was 11 years old when she made the commitment to dance professionally, gaining a place at the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School. Few 11 year olds have the passion and resolve to commit to their future career at such a young age, and then go on to fully realise their dream.

“It was extremely demanding,” Cathy admits, “and I missed out on many things that the average teenage girl would do. I was very passionate about my dancing though so it didn’t concern me much. Fortunately, my parents kept me grounded.”

After the VCA, and three years at the Australian Ballet School, Cathy accepted a place with the Australian Ballet Company following her graduation. When she was offered the chance to dance with England’s Northern Ballet Theatre Company in Manchester, she seized it wholeheartedly, dancing with them for the next four years. Her next move was back to Australia, to the WA Ballet Company, which was to be her home for ten years.

When asked if there were any stand out moments in her career, Cathy describes Rudolf Nureyev joining their company for two seasons in London as a definite high point. Her most

treasured memory is of playing Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with a very special and talented partner. She sums up this moment in her career when she was truly “living for the moment on stage and being completely free and fulfilled.”

Every dancer knows that the physical rigours of training cannot be endured forever. At the end of 1998 Cathy knew that the hard work and dedication were starting to outweigh the enjoyment, so she decided to retire.

She had already been studying Wine Science part time, in preparation for the transition from dancing, and was looking around at suitable properties to buy. When a spectacular vineyard site, at a 200 metre elevation on 110 acres, came up for sale in Dixon’s Creek, she bought it with her parents. “I’d always had a very keen interest in wine and used to visit the wine regions wherever I was working or travelling. It was a bit of a dream.” “The property is a piece of heaven and we named it Sutherland Estate, my Mum’s maiden name. The elevation gives it magical views and a wonderfully cool microclimate conducive to premium quality fruit.”

Establishing the winery required similar commitment, dedication and attention to detail that Cathy had long applied in her dancing career.

Her father Ron designed and built the stunning cellar door and ten acres of vines were planted, including two grape



THIS PAGE The view down to Sutherland Estate cellar door. Angus and his trophy shovel. The Coldstream Hills oak barrels.
OPPOSITE PAGE Cathy and a student doing the splits. Cathy making minor adjustments.



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varieties unusual to the Yarra Valley - Tempranillo and Gewürztraminer. “We wanted to plant a couple of the lesser known varieties for interest, as winemakers, as well as for a point of difference. We researched many varietals but these appeared to suit our microclimate.”

For many people, running a winery would be a full time occupation, but not for Cathy and Angus. Not only do they have three children under the age of seven, but Angus also works fulltime as Assistant Winemaker at Coldstream Hills, one of the valley’s most prestigious wineries.

Before he turned his hand to winemaking fulltime in the Yarra Valley, Angus had also had an intensely demanding career.

Angus

Growing up on the water near Manly, on Sydney’s Northern Beaches, Angus’ childhood was spent in, and on the ocean, competing in his first Sydney to Hobart Yacht race at the tender age of 16. His love of debating and chess during high school helped inform his decision at a young age to become a barrister.

As a teenager, he lived for a year in Denmark and it was here that his interest in wine was piqued and from this point on, he always dreamed he would manage to combine his time at the Bar with winemaking. Specialising as an Equity-Commercial barrister, dealing largely with contracts and corporations, didn’t allow much time for winemaking, but once he’d established himself as a young barrister, he began studying Wine Science. It was here that he and Cathy met.

During his ten years at the bar, he recalls one particular incident that struck a chord. He was acting for a lady who had been sacked, without proper reason, by her employer. Not motivated by compensation, she simply needed someone in authority to acknowledge her mistreatment.

Angus won her a victory in the Industrial Relations Commission and still marvels that more than an hour had passed after the verdict was handed down before she asked what sum she had been awarded.

Whilst situations like this gave Angus a certain degree of fulfilment, they couldn’t compete with the feelings he experienced when making wine. For him, creating something so positive, of such beauty, designed for giving pleasure, sat in stark contrast to the negativity of litigation, where all parties involved are under duress.

Angus appreciates variety in his work and both his careers have fortunately afforded him that. But law gave him the intellectual stretch and he, “greatly enjoyed the intensity and immediacy of the contest in court.” There are aspects of his former life he misses. “There is necessarily a tremendous communion in being a barrister...It’s like being part of a close, but argumentative family.”

He experiences a different communion now; being in touch with the slower rhythm of nature and its seasons, coupled with spending more time (outside vintage) with his family.

Had he remained at the Bar, he would not have become a Tollana Winemaker and made an award winning single vineyard wine from Pinot Noir grown by Dr Hugh Robinson on the Mornington Peninsula. The second vintage of his Tollana Pinot (2009) took out the Trophy for Best Pinot Noir at the Brisbane Wine Show, an achievement most barristers can only dream of.

He has been at Coldstream Hills since the 2004 vintage and now, seven years on, he is in the thick of vintage again.

So with Angus putting in 12 hour days at Coldstream and harvest about to begin at Sutherland Estate, it is all hands on deck – and that includes the children. ‘I just hope they don’t eat as many of the grapes as they did last year’ Cathy says, smiling, ‘and maybe we’ll get a decent tonnage!’



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