

Cover Story

Empire of the sun

The winery at Seppeltsfield in the Barossa Valley is a treasure-trove of Australian history and fabulous wines.

Ralph Kyte-Powell goes exploring.

MOST true fans have their places of pilgrimage. Cricket tragics visit the MCG, the Adelaide Oval, or head to London and Lords; the Elvis crowd try to get to Graceland; surfers want to conquer Bells Beach; military enthusiasts explore the beaches of Normandy.

Serious wine lovers are better catered for than most fans when it comes to pilgrimage sites: the precarious, fabled slopes and half-gabled villages of the Mosel and Rhine in Germany; the stately chateaux of Bordeaux in France; and Italy's ancient wine towns of Tuscany

uniquely evoke romance and history.

Along with the lovely countryside, wine regions usually enjoy a superbly symbiotic relationship with other gastronomic industries and local cuisine. Thus many have distinctive local specialities, good produce and great places to eat. Wine pilgrimage is the way to go.

In Australia we have our own places of pilgrimage, and they are every bit as fascinating as the foreign ones. Tahbilk, in central Victoria, is a piece of Victoriana frozen in time, a 150-year-old living museum that produces some of



Australia's most traditional wines. You have to go there. In NSW, the Tyrrell's Hunter Valley winery is a must. The wines are the essence of the region and the dirt-floored, ramshackle buildings somehow capture the feel of a simpler, bygone age. South Australians are spoilt for pilgrimage sites: the Penfolds Magill Estate, the home of Grange, makes a fascinating destination, and there are others super-rich in heritage and atmosphere.

But to my mind, there's one South Australian destination that every wine pilgrim must see above all others. As you wind your way through the rolling hills of the Barossa Valley, a turn towards Marananga, off the Sturt Highway and down Seppeltsfield Road, takes you into another place and time. A little way along, an avenue of tall, mature palm trees looms. Then, set back on high ground above the road, is your first surprise. An imposing colonnaded grey stone building looks down a palm-lined lane, at odds with the pastoral Barossa landscape. It's a grand mausoleum,

and further on, a village of picturesque Victorian-era buildings emerges from behind the palms and gum trees. This is Seppeltsfield.

Joseph Ernst Seppelt sailed for South Australia with his family in 1849 from Silesia, a province on the borders of what are now Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. His family's business there sold tobacco and made liqueurs, and Joseph's aim in this new land was to grow tobacco. Two unsuccessful attempts to develop tobacco farming, first near Adelaide and later, in 1852, on land he'd bought and called "Seppeltsfield" in the Barossa Valley, converted him to growing grain. He also planted a small vineyard and encouraged neighbours to get into viticulture to supply him with grapes. Soon he was successfully producing and marketing his own wine in surrounding districts and along the Murray River. Seppelt wines had arrived.

Joseph Seppelt died in 1868 at age 55. His energetic son Benno, just 21, took over the expanding enterprise and set about making

the Seppelt wine brand a household name. In 1867 he began the grand Seppeltsfield winery complex. A new distillery opened in 1877.

In 1878 Benno began the practice of putting away a cask of port from that and each subsequent vintage, with instructions that they were to be held for 100 years, but more of that later. A vinegar plant was established in 1882, a big new winery in 1885. By the early 1900s, these buildings had been joined by a butchery, a cooperage, a piggery, a smokehouse and a laboratory. More than 200 varieties of roses thrived in the gardens. Seppeltsfield was the largest winery in Australia. Along the way, Benno Seppelt, who rode a white stallion and always carried a violin, found time to invent clever winery machinery, and he even modelled his own clothing range, "Bennowear".

Seppelt also pushed across the border into Victoria, with the purchase of established vineyards and cellars at Rutherglen.

Benno retired in 1916 and his son Oscar took over and continued



The living museum that is Seppeltsfield, in South Australia's Barossa Valley



his father's expansion program. The grand Chateau Tanunda in the Barossa was bought in 1916, a vineyard was planted at Barooga in southern NSW, and the impressive Great Western cellars in Victoria were bought as a headquarters for sparkling wine. New wineries were established in the Barossa at Nuriootpa and at Dorrien.

In 1931 Benno Seppelt died as the Depression was hitting the Barossa Valley hard. He was interred in the elaborate family mausoleum that had been built in 1927. Sited on the highest ground in the area, this classical building with its doric columns and grove of palms remains today as the final resting place of 28 members of the extended Seppelt family.

A new generation of Seppelt heirs continued to expand the business after World War II, pioneering new regions in Victoria and South Australia and buying a vineyard in the NSW Hunter Valley. All were keyed in to table wine production as a post-war wine boom took hold.

Seppeltsfield also had a history of table wine production but its main role was as a headquarters for fortified wines, sherry types, port, muscat and the like — styles whose popularity had been in slow decline. Nevertheless, in 1978 its fortified stocks were in the news because of Benno Seppelt. As mentioned earlier, Benno's practice of putting aside a cask of each year's port-style fortified wine for release in 100 years was begun in 1878. In 1978 the first of these ancient wines, a variation of the famous Para label, was released to great fanfare. These Seppeltsfield wines continue to be released, making it the only winery in the world that regularly sells a century-

old wine as part of its range.

The 1980s was a time of takeovers and mergers in the wine business, and the Seppelt enterprise was not immune. In 1985 it was bought by South Australian Brewing, which later became Southcorp. In 2005, brewing giant Foster's bought Southcorp Wines.

Seppelt floundered under corporate ownership. Bean counters, balance sheets and brand managers aren't necessarily the healthiest combination for a wine company. The fortified wines from Seppeltsfield were curios for a small niche market, and completely out of favour with the public at large.

Under the ownership of Foster's, however, the Seppelt brand enjoyed a resurrection of sorts; the Foster's wine people probably realised its significance better than their predecessors. The Seppeltsfield complex remained relatively untouched but Foster's, realising that running such a unique place fell well outside its abilities, started looking for a buyer.

Despite assurances from Foster's that Seppeltsfield would only be sold to an appropriate buyer, one that appreciated the history, heritage and beauty of the place, many despaired that it would be subject to "development" by a new owner, losing much of its charm. Seppeltsfield needed help.

Enter Nathan Waks.

As a young musician studying at the Paris Conservatoire in the late 1960s, Nathan Waks took a job as an au pair with the family of a professor at the Sorbonne. The professor decided to educate the young classical cellist from Australia about some of the finer things of life. Every night a different French wine

and French farmhouse cheese was served. "I learnt about wine back then in pretty good circumstances," he says now. "Wines I would never normally have been able to taste were served up, in a great atmosphere. I discovered wine, and when I returned home I was amazed at how good the Australian wines were."

While playing for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and touring internationally with the Sydney String Quartet, Waks maintained his passion for wine. Along the way he became involved with the Kilikanoon operation in South Australia's Clare Valley, founded by Kevin Mitchell in 1997.

Waks' involvement in Seppeltsfield came out of the blue. Hearing from a friend that the Seppelt wine business was for sale, he followed it and found it was only Seppeltsfield that was on the market. Waks had visited the place years before and been impressed. "They wanted to sell the whole kit and caboodle — buildings, vineyard, all of Seppelt's ancient fortified wine stocks, the intellectual property," he says. "It looked a big challenge but there was great potential reward. It would take a long time, but I thought we could re-popularise these great Australian fortified wines."

What Waks and his partners got were the raw materials for the renaissance of a great Australian institution. Along with 3 million litres of mostly high-quality fortified wines in wood (plus 6 million litres held in stewardship for other labels), there were 250 acres of mature vineyards, much of it planted to old shiraz and bush-vine grenache. Most

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The fortified wines from Seppeltsfield were curios for a small niche market.



The distillery at Seppeltsfield, from 1877.



Visionary empire builder Benno Seppelt.

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of the old buildings and facilities were intact, and the new owners have set about the job of restoration with gusto.

Benno Seppelt's 19th century gravity-flow winery, with its many open fermenters, has been recommissioned after spending 30 years in mothballs. A cooper is back at work making barrels. The long-gone Seppeltsfield raspberry cordial that sustained bygone generations of South Australian kids is being made again to the same old family recipe. Benno's Kiosk sells Seppeltsfield's own German-style beers, brewed according to the 14th century German beer purity laws. The gardens are being restored and future plans include olive oil, cheese, and the re-establishment of the smokehouse. For a fee, visitors can take tours of Seppeltsfield, one that allows you to taste wine of the year of your birth.

Perhaps the greatest assets to come with the purchase were the skills of expert fortified winemaker, blender and curator, James Godfrey, whose 33 years at Seppeltsfield give him unique experience with the amazing, irreplaceable collection of fortified wines that go back to 1878.



Musician, entrepreneur, and rescuer of Seppeltsfield, Nathan Waks.

The winery produces a range of excellent table wines under the Glenpara label, and future winemaking plans include a range from the superb old vineyard. A new winemaker, Fiona McDonald, who was involved with making Penfolds Grange for some years, is a key part of those plans. Seppeltsfield looks to be headed in the right direction.

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TASTING NOTES: THE SEPPELTSFIELD WINES

Paramount Collection XO Oloroso 500ml \$149

Deep amber-walnut colour with a touch of olive on the edge shows the age of this blend. It smells ultra-complex and inviting with a seamless mix of candied fruits, nuts, gingery spice and honey on the nose. There's intensely focused sweetness to begin with, but it dries out across the palate with great depth. Superb. (Cork, 22.5 per cent alc.)

Rare Tokay 375ml \$59

A glass-staining Rutherglen tokay of great concentration with origins in the 1964 vintage. Dark toffee, vanilla and malt extract aromas are deep and pervasive. It's very sweet with burnt sugar and grilled almond flavours, supported by a long, tangy aftertaste. (Cork, 17 per cent alc.)

Paramount Collection XO Tokay 500ml \$249

Extraordinary depth of colour in the walnut-brown spectrum introduces this majestic sweet fortified. The blend goes back to 1922 and age has melded a complex array of aromas and flavours into a seamless symphony of black toffee, raisins and spice. Please excuse me waxing lyrical — this really is incredibly impressive! (Cork, 17.3 per cent alc.)

Rare Muscat 375ml \$59

This aged muscat is based on an extraordinary parcel of super-ripe Rutherglen muscat from 1983. It has a complex nose of muscatels, spice, Christmas cake and grilled almonds. The palate is sweet and lush with gorgeous, lingering, roasted, muscat flavour, finishing with lively acidity. (Cork, 17 per cent alc.)

Paramount Collection XO Muscat 500ml \$249

A tad more restrained than the Rare Muscat, but more seductive, this very old blend marries toffee and marzipan-like muscat fruit with barrel-aged rancio character and clean spirit into a slightly brandified, refined wine of piercing varietal identity. Luscious. (Cork, 17.6 per cent alc.)

Para 21 Year Old Vintage Tawny 1988 750ml \$75

This vintage-dated liqueur port is the inheritor of a long tradition. Less heavy and lush than it once was, it has intense nutty, spice, raisin and brandy-spirit-like characters. The palate is fresh and clean. (Cork, 20.5 per cent alc.)

DP90 Rare Tawny 500ml \$69

One of Australia's most famous show wines. Wood age has transformed fruit

character into something of great elegance and refinement. It's intense and precise, yet it's not heavy. Its marzipan, dried cherry, spice, spirit and nutty characters are simply lovely. (Cork, 20.5 per cent alc.)

Paramount Collection XO Tawny 500ml \$349

Taken from a solera containing a portion of every vintage Para from 1878 to the current release, it emphasises delicacy and finesse. Aromas of leather, spice, raisins and scorched almond brittle introduce a subtle, sweet palate of extraordinary complexity and persistence, finishing savoury with an ultra-long aftertaste. (Cork, 20.5 per cent alc.)

Para 100 Year Old Vintage Tawny 1909

375ml \$1000

How does one assess a century-old fortified wine? Here goes. At first it has medicinal notes of aldehyde, old oak and brandy-like spirit. Hidden within is a core of dark, berry-like fruit, immortally preserved alongside incredibly complex nuances of nuts, spice, plum pud and kirsch/eau-de-vie that change constantly as the wine takes air in the glass. Very sweet to taste, its complex, lingering, treacly finish is amazing. Wow! (Cork, 21.7 per cent alc.)

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Odd man out

A wine company that prides itself on 100-year-old products is a difficult fit in most corporate structures
Mark Hawthorne reports.



IT WILL come as cold comfort to lovers of Seppeltsfield's fortified wines, but the seeds of the company's corporate woes were sown by the man behind some of the winemaker's finest creations.

As Ralph Kyte-Powell has explained previously, Joseph Seppelt, a Silesian immigrant, founded Seppeltsfield as a tobacco farm and then winery in 1851. But it was his eldest son, Benno Seppelt, who built the wine business into the famous brand that stands today.

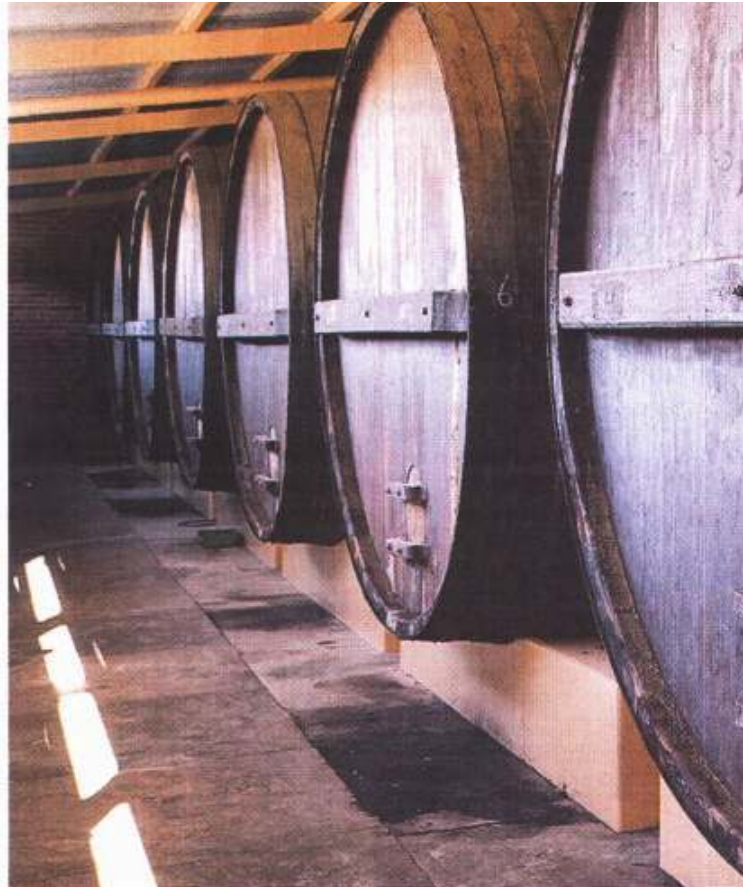
In 1878 Benno selected a single 500-litre puncheon of his finest single-vintage port and put it in the cellar at Seppeltsfield, with instructions that it was to sit, unsold and unmoved, for 100 years. The famous 100-year-old Para Liqueur Port was born, and Seppeltsfield remains the only company in the world that releases a 100-year-old wine every year. But it's a wine that encapsulates all that is right and wrong with company's business model. Storing a liqueur wine

for a century before sale may do wonders for its complexity and allure, but it doesn't do much to help line the pockets of company shareholders or directors.

Therein lies the core problem that has beset Seppeltsfield since the 1980s, during which time ownership has flipped between SA Brewing, Southcorp, Foster's Group and now Kilikanoon.

Put simply, fortified wines make aficionados rejoice, and accountants weep in frustration.

When Foster's Group put





Seppeltsfield up for sale in 2006, following the beer giant's \$3.7 billion takeover of Southcorp, the winery was sitting on an astonishing 9 million litres of unsold fortified wine, 3 million of which went with the Seppeltsfield brand, with the remainder tied to other Foster's labels.

That vast inventory included such unfashionable varieties as sherry and tawny port, and it makes up one of the largest stocks of old fortified wines outside the Portuguese island of Madeira.

The purchase of Southcorp by Foster's was done at the peak of the market. The brewer struggled to integrate Southcorp wines into its business, battled an unfavourable foreign exchange rate, and shed scores of wonderful small wineries as a result.

Foster's produces alcohol on a grand scale. Unless a winery makes wine on a grand scale, it will struggle to hold its place in the Foster's stable.

Seppeltsfield and its range of low-production fortified wines was one of the first casualties, but not the only one. It took Foster's 18 months to find a buyer, before

a consortium led by Kilikanoon owner Nathan Waks and Janet Holmes a Court bid for it in 2007.

Under the deal, Kilikanoon takes the stock of back vintages and 185 hectares of vines near the town of Tanunda in the Barossa Valley.

It also has a long-term contract to produce Penfolds fortifieds under licence to Foster's. The brewer keeps the Seppelt brand for table and sparkling wines, and the company's facility at Great Western in Victoria. Seppeltsfield is also barred from making still wine under any Seppelt-related label.

Since 2006 Foster's has shed wineries across the country. Some, such as the sale of the The Poplars, the former Jamieson's Run winery at Coonawarra, were done soon after the purchase of Southcorp. Other sales are more recent.

Last year Foster's announced it was selling 37 more wineries and brands, to try to recoup \$243 million to help reduce debt. Thirteen brands — including Queen Adelaide, Minchinbury, Matthew Lang, Andrew Garrett, Maglieri of McLaren Vale, Rouge

Homme, Great Western, Galway Pipe, and Yarra Ridge — were sold into a joint venture with privately held Vok Beverages in October last year.

The 140-year-old Bailey's of Glenrowan winery and vineyard near Rutherglen is still for sale. Kaiser Stuhl, it's glory days of the 1970s long gone, was killed off completely.

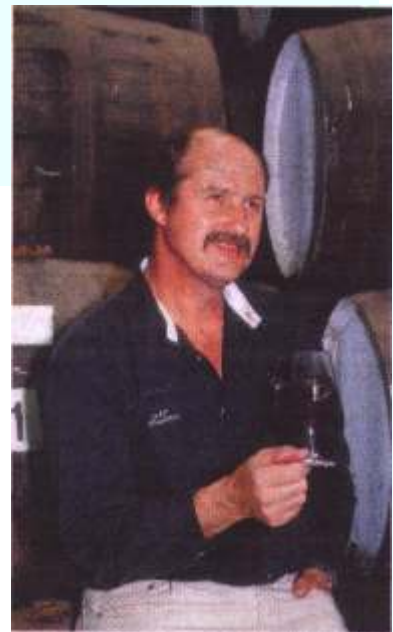
For lovers of Australian fortifieds, the notion that the country could slowly lose some of its great treasures is heart-breaking, but the reality lies in the numbers.

Over the past decade, fortified wine consumption in Australia has plunged. It's down from 23.9 million litres in 1998-99 to 16.3 million litres last financial year, and continues to slide.

When quizzed about the sale of Seppeltsfield, sources at Foster's were unsentimental. "I love fortifieds too," said one executive. "But ask yourself this, when was the last time you actually went out and bought a bottle?"

And there lies the fight for Kilikanoon.

Put simply, fortified wines make aficionados rejoice, and accountants weep in frustration.



Left, the treasury of Seppeltsfield, barrels of ancient wines. Above, master blender James Godfrey.

PICTURE: DAVID WALL / LONELY PLANET IMAGES