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# FORTIFYING SEPPELTSFIELD



D. PAUL HARDY

## The strategy behind a revival of a grand old landmark of the Barossa

PRESERVING heritage was foremost in the minds of a group headed by Kilikanoon winery that decided to buy the embattled Seppeltsfield winery and brands - but not merely to preserve the great Barossa buildings and wines only as museum relics.

"We saw Seppeltsfield as an investment in living history," says Kilikanoon managing director Nathan Waks, who is also steering the Seppeltsfield enterprise. "Seppeltsfield is such an iconic destination and remains one of the most visited sites in the Barossa, though it can't just be a tourist attraction. The new Seppeltsfield has to be a working historical village, a productive winery and a range of wines that stand up and attract a lot more attention in the marketplace."

A purchase agreement was settled with previous owners, Fosters, in August 2007, conducted through the Seppeltsfield Estate Trust, comprising Kilikanoon Wines, Janet Holmes a Court, Greg Paramor and Kilikanoon's major shareholders, Nathan Waks and Bruce Baudinet.

Soon after the purchase, Nathan announced plans to "revive the village in all its cets" and immediate physical changes started happening among the cluster of National Trust-registered bluestone structures built by Joseph Seppelt from 1851. A cooperage is now operating and Benno's has been opened - a kiosk that serves, coffee, snacks and the company's two new German-accented beers, Barossa Bock and Barossa Blonde, as well as the famous Seppeltsfield raspberry cordial that has been revived. "We started producing it to the original recipe and people have said it's authentic," says Nathan, "and that's important to us, because we aim to remain true to the original Seppelt family ideals."

"When we purchased Seppeltsfield, we wanted to lay out an agenda straight away, to show our intentions about respecting and reviving Seppeltsfield's heritage, but we're shy of declaring too much, because we want to do it all properly and restoring the National Trust buildings is expensive. We've got something

worth preserving and spending money on, so the next phase will take time."

The purchase deal struck with Fosters not only included the historic Seppeltsfield site, winery, vineyards and visitor facilities, but also the rights to the Para, Trafford, Old Trafford, Solero and Mt Rufus fortified wine brands, and the majority of nine million litres of Seppelt fortified wine stock currently on site. While long viewed as a national treasure, this stock - with uninterrupted vintages from 1878 - has been difficult for previous owners to effectively market and sell. Fosters struggled, though the new owners have immediately put plans into action to revive fortified fortunes.

"We are making sure the icons are properly understood and promoted in the marketplace," says Nathan, referring mainly to 100-year-old Para, but also drawing a bead on the range of celebrated rare fortifieds. "We have introduced new labels and are presenting them like luxury spirits now, ▶



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rather than dusty old fortifieds,” says sales and marketing manager David Muster. “These are exceptional wines, and we’re doing whatever we can to make people look at them with fresh eyes.”

A new distribution arrangement in Australia with Negotiants also aims to push Seppeltsfield fortified products harder in the marketplace, striving to reintroduce them to fine wine customers. “Robert Hill Smith (proprietor of Yalumba and Negotiants) understands the value of fortifieds, and we aim to promote these as an important part of any list in a restaurant, club or bar,” says Nathan.

The most striking revelation is the introduction of a new product - Seppeltsfield Ruby, a lightly fortified grenache rose style (16 per cent alcohol), based on the model of a Portuguese white port. Thinking far beyond Australia’s traditional market of fortified wine drinkers, Ruby is being promoted to be drunk chilled, over ice, with lime or other mixers, targeting younger drinkers in clubs and bars. “It may not be new - but it is for our market,” says Nathan. “So far, the response we have had is very positive and encouraging.”

Seppeltsfield will also soon introduce a new Paramount Range of fortifieds,

comprising a tawny, muscat, tokay, oloroso, amontillado and brandy - being elite, small-parcel releases designed to appease collectors and fans at an attractive price point that sits between the Seppeltsfield rare range and 100-year-old Para. “Working with such small volumes didn’t fit the Fosters model, but for Kilikanoon, as a boutique winery, that’s exactly the way we work,” says Nathan.

Intrinsic to the development of these new products is the input of fortified winemaking maestro James Godfrey, whose services are now shared between Fosters and Seppeltsfield. “He’s being



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helpful and innovative, building mini soleras to support the Paramount Range and playing a leading hand in developing the Ruby," explains Nathan. "James is making sure his precious old wines are protected and respected, but he's not averse to new ideas."

Rounding out the Seppeltsfield portfolio is a range of table wines available under the Glenpara brand (a Barossa label from the 1860s that Seppeltsfield acquired in the early 1900s): Head Office and Pump House shiraz (both named after Seppeltsfield buildings) and, interestingly, the Elm Walk riesling and rose, both having fruit sourced

from the Clare Valley. There is also a Glenpara grenache shiraz mataro blend, sourced from both Barossa and Clare vineyards. In coming vintages, this range will have input from Kilikanoon winemaker Kevin Mitchell and Seppeltsfield winemaker Sarah Siddons, and is designed to show off exclusive small-batch wines made in

the recommissioned gravity flow winery at Seppeltsfield, built by Benno Seppelt in the 1880s to the traditional Portugese Lagar method (human treading of the grapes).

There is also a vineyard improvement program in place for almost 100 hectares of shiraz and grenache, with some

cabernet sauvignon, touriga (for VP fortifieds) and palomino (for sherry styles) - developments that will ultimately be shown off in the quality of new reserve wines under the Glenpara label.

"We have a wonderful resource that's just sitting there. It's so important that it all still exists, but we're working hard to find new ways of using it," says Nathan. "We can't be precious about this - change won't be for the worst; we'll be very respectful and mindful of preserving heritage and quality, but change will continue at Seppeltsfield." 🍷

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