

# MICHAEL DHILLON: VIGNERON

Michael Dhillon can trace his Gisborne heritage back to his great-great-great grandfather Henry Gardner who, during the 1850s, was an employee at the Gisborne Bush Inn, searched for gold at Bendigo for a while then returned to Gisborne to work at the cordial factory before becoming proprietor of the Telegraph Hotel. Michael's line of descent through his mother Kaye King includes local names such as Dixon, Pearce, Campbell and King. Michael's great-uncle Humphrey Dixon donated the land for the Gisborne Bush Nursing Hospital and Michael was born in that hospital in 1968.

Michael's mother, Kaye King, married Darshan ("Bill") Dhillon in 1964 at the Gisborne Presbyterian Church and it was Bill who had the vision to establish a vineyard at the 170-hectare property in Melton Road that he had named 'Bindi', a Punjabi word meaning wisdom and humility. It is also an aboriginal word for beautiful place or butterfly.

Kaye's father Keith King had bought Bundaleer, a large property on the Melton Road, and after Keith's death the property was split in three and sold. Bill and Kaye inherited the southern portion.

Bill was the youngest son of a successful Punjabi farmer and he was born in 1937. At the time Bill's father was developing a rubber and palm oil plantation near Butterworth in what was then Malaya. As a teenager Bill was sent to Australia to be educated at Ballarat Grammar and from there he graduated to Melbourne University to study engineering.

During that time he met Kaye who was training at Melbourne Teachers' College. They came to live in Gisborne where Bill built the squash courts at the back of what is now the Faithworks Christian Church in Aitken Street while Kaye established a craft shop, the Wool and Wheel, at the front of the premises.

Originally they ran Bindi as a sheep property but Bill had always dreamed of establishing a vineyard because of the influence of a charismatic teacher who had mentored him at Ballarat Grammar. That teacher was Kostas Rind who had immigrated to Australia from Lithuania and was recruited to teach at Ballarat Grammar while staying at the Bonegilla Migrant Hostel near Wodonga. Kostas was a wine lover and he introduced Bill to a new world that grew to be an abiding interest.

In 1988 Bill planted his first vines and within 10 years he

and Michael had built a winery and from then on wine production became the major focus of the farm. At the same time Bill removed the sheep to allow the land to regenerate and as a result the native grasses and trees are now thriving. As well, he established a 14-hectare eucalyptus plantation of ironbark and sugar gums.

Michael and his older sister Jenny attended kinder at the Presbyterian Church Hall then went to school at Gisborne Primary. Jenny started her secondary years at Braemar whereas Michael began at Gisborne Secondary College before they both moved on to Penleigh and Essendon Grammar for their final years.

It was there that Michael met Wendy, his future wife. Michael completed an economics degree at Monash but never continued in that field as he had caught the wine bug from his father and became increasingly involved in all things connected with the wine industry.

Michael and Bill received generous advice from the many members of the local wine-growing community as they developed their expertise as winemakers. Bill's motto was "Do things well and patiently" and this slow but sure philosophy has seen the enterprise flourish.

Between 1994 and 1999 Michael travelled throughout the wine-growing regions of France and Italy to learn as much as he could about new developments.

From what he saw there he realised that it was possible to plant more densely than had been the conventional way in Australia.

Making this major change required a considerable investment in new equipment to work the tighter plantings. While the result has seen the production of smaller bunches, the wines have developed more complex and pleasing characters.

The Bindi vineyards now extend over 7.7 hectares with approximately 30,000 vines, and further plantings are being made. One of those is named 'Darshan' in memory of Michael's father. The varieties chosen are suited to high altitude late-ripening areas like Gisborne and the sloping volcanic land sweeping west from Mount Gisborne provides ideal soils for plantings of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the latter variety making up three quarters of the vineyard. The Bindi soils have well balanced fertility, are

**Michael Dhillon is a sixth-generation member of the Gisborne community and an outstanding producer of fine wines at Bindi, his property south of Gisborne. Bryan Power spoke with him.**



Michael Dhillon

well drained and are conducive to the development of deep rooting.

These wines are marketed under the Bindi label but Michael also sources Shiraz grapes from Heathcote and this line is named Pyrette (as an acknowledgement of the nearby Pyrette Forest).

Fine wine people are an inspiring community and many of them have assisted in establishing a market for Bindi and Pyrette wines. Sommeliers and wine waiters have been part of this network that has created a keen demand for the excellent wines produced at Bindi.

Michael has found export markets in 12 countries, the most important of which are the USA, Hong Kong, Singapore and the UK.

Wine making is hands-on work. The Bindi vines are hand-pruned, the grapes hand-picked, the fruit crushed, and the wines matured on site in 228-litre French oak barrels. Michael does not add yeast or nutrients to the maturing wines.

Longtime local Iain Luke, vineyard manager, works with Michael and a team of professional pickers is brought in to ensure that the crop is gathered as quickly as possible once the grapes

reach their peak. Michael's wife Wendy and their daughters Ruby, 17, and Emma, 16, also play their roles in tasks such as netting, bottling, labelling, dispatching and administration.

In preparing this article I was impressed by several enlightening reviews I found of the Bindi wines (which frequently receive 5-star ratings).

Famous winemaker James Halliday writes: "One of the icons of Macedon. The Chardonnay is top-shelf, the Pinot Noir as remarkable (albeit in a very different idiom) as Bass Phillip, Giaconda or any of the other tiny-production, icon wines. The addition of Heathcote-sourced shiraz under the Pyrette label confirms Bindi as one of the greatest small producers in Australia."

Other reviews I saw include:

"Michael Dhillon crafts spectacularly refined, delicate, compact and multi-layered Chardonnays (and Pinot Noirs) of great precision."

"Bindi is one of the best and most important vineyards in Victoria. ... With increasing vine age now providing more underlying richness and complexity, its low-cropped wines are entering a new phase of excellence ... it is regularly achieving in its fruit a rare combination of richness, intensity and focus."

The achievements of Michael Dhillon and his family at Bindi are yet another example of why we locals can be pleased and proud to be residents of the remarkable Macedon Ranges.



High density planting at Bindi.



The Bindi label named in honour of Michael's mother, Kaye Dhillon.