

‘Hill-Smith seems gripped by the need to inform, to explain his mission at the helm of the 164-year-old winery’

The *Decanter* interview

Robert Hill-Smith

An aristocrat of the Australian winemaking industry, Robert Hill-Smith is a scion of one of the country’s most historic winemaking families. However, it’s his vision for the future that has turned Yalumba into a dynamic global success story, writes Adam Lechmere

Hill-Smith at a glance

Born 1951
Education Bachelor of Business (Marketing), University of South Australia
Career 1976: intern at computer giant IBM; 1978: travel including vintages at Bordeaux’s Ch Rahoul and Ch Padouen; 1979-80: manager at merchant Samuel Smith & Son; 1981-83: export then marketing manager at Yalumba; 1985: managing director, Yalumba; 1989: owner, Yalumba
Family Married to Annabel. Father to daughters Jessica, Lucy and Georgia
Hobbies Cricket, AFL football, thoroughbred breeding and racing, art, wine and food

This page: Robert Hill-Smith in the Tri-Centenary Block, a Grenache vineyard planted in 1889

WE WERE SOMEWHERE around North Adelaide, on the edge of open country, when I first noticed Robert Hill-Smith’s unusual driving style. Needing to gesticulate with both hands when explaining something, he crooks his leg and steers the car, even at considerable speed, with one knee. This is not to say he’s a bad driver – on the contrary, he handles his large BMW skilfully – just that it is slightly disconcerting, especially as my every query elicited a detailed answer. I actually began to think I should make my questions more anodyne – ‘What’s your favourite wine?’ rather than asking him about the future of sub-regionality in South Australia. The owner of Yalumba is an excellent interviewee: open, frank, unguarded, opinionated. He seems gripped by the need to inform, to explain his mission (my word, not his, but somehow appropriate) at the helm of the 164-year-old winery. Along with Henschke, Jim Barry, De Bortoli, McWilliams and half a dozen others, Yalumba is one of the great family-owned producers of Australia, with a portfolio and rich library of some of the country’s longest established wines. At a recent run of Yalumba’s Museum Tasting, where Hill-Smith showcases the wines of his peers – Henschke, Jim Barry, Vasse Felix – alongside his own, we saw The Signature Cabernet Sauvignon-Shiraz from 1966, a Yalumba Riesling 1938, and a Shiraz Port 1922. The Signature is just one of a vertical portfolio of great Cabernet-Shiraz blends: The Scribbler, FDR1A, The Reserve. Then there are the single-vineyard

offerings – The Octavius, The Menzies Coonawarra. But it’s not for these wines that Yalumba is best known. The winery is really sold by its Y Series range, a line-up of dependable, sub-£10, entry-level bottles: Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, Riesling, Vermentino, Viognier, Unwooded Chardonnay, Sangiovese Rosé, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Shiraz-Viognier and Shiraz. Y Series and the ubiquitous Oxford Landing, which was founded in the 1950s by Hill-Smith’s father, Wyndham Hill-Smith, account for 60% of Yalumba’s turnover. The paradox Despite its ancient vineyards and eminent pedigree, Yalumba doesn’t – yet – have a Grange, a Bin 60A, a Hill of Grace, an Armagh. It’s got its prestige cuvées, of course: the \$150 (£83) Yalumba Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon and the \$90 (£50) Octavius, but it just doesn’t seem to swim in the same waters as Penfolds and Henschke. Hill-Smith is perfectly aware of this puzzle; indeed, he called his as-yet-unreleased prestige single-vineyard Shiraz Paradox for that very reason. ‘It is a paradox. At Yalumba we are more serious, considered and successful about our winemaking than the majority of the serious wine-drinking public give us credit for. We’d be far better producing serious, profitable, “high end” wine; that is, if we threw it all away and started a new label, built a tin shed and told everyone we’re latter-day artisans.’ Implicit in this vision of tin-shed, artisan winemaking is the issue of price and marketing. ➤

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Hill-Smith balks at anything that smacks of showing off. He thinks there’s something indelicate in the idea of charging huge sums ‘for the sake of standing at a bar and saying, “Look at me, look at what I’ve made, this really important wine that I think I’m going to charge \$500 for”.’

There are sound business reasons for this, of course. ‘What about in 10 years’ time when you’re going to have to drop your prices, and you’ve burned bridges with everyone who’s been a friend of your label? You try to go back to find them, and they’ve migrated elsewhere. We have 50,000 customers who trust us to make good wine and not overcharge them. It takes you a long time to get people there, and you don’t want to abandon them.’

Does he protest too much? Hill-Smith is bona fide Australian aristocracy, fifth-generation scion of an ancient house, and I wonder if there is a slight disdain for the parvenus with their heavy bottles and macho punts (Yalumba bottles are generally light European affairs) who unashamedly chase the money. ‘Maybe an Indian or a Chinese or a Russian would pay that much, but I can’t be bothered going to sit in these places and try to get them to pay.’

There’s the rub: he’s happy to have some blockbusters – there’s an allegedly superb Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon-Barossa Shiraz 2012 sitting in barrel that he says is going to be ‘the iconic release’, with a price-tag north of \$200 (£112) – but he doesn’t want to wave them around in people’s faces. ‘We haven’t beaten our chests loudly enough,’ he says.

This unwillingness to shout too loud wins Yalumba and its owner many friends. Journalist Matthew Jukes, who has asked him to chair his Great Australian Red competition this year, is a fan. ‘He’s absolutely devoid of ego,’ he says; ‘there’s nothing flashy about Yalumba, and Robert is very well aware of drinkability and value for money.’

Passion for Viognier

Jukes also mentions the ‘huge camaraderie’ of Yalumba, which is evident to anyone who visits the handsome stone winery at Angaston. People enjoy working for Hill-Smith; most of his employees have been there more than 20 years. Low staff turnover is the surest sign of a happy company.

I think what they like is his rather quixotic attitude. There’s his dedication to Viognier, for example. There are very few producers of single-varietal Viognier in Australia and none come near to Yalumba’s comprehensive range, which goes from the Y Series Viognier, through the Eden Valley and up to the flagship The Virgilius, a wine which matures beautifully into something luscious and spicy, as I saw with the marvellously opulent yet precise 2003.



Hill-Smith lays all the credit for this at the feet of Louisa Rose, his longstanding and low-key winemaker. ‘The Viognier project was going nowhere until Louisa came on board in 1995,’ he says. ‘They were flavourless, neutral, dry whites until we saw the fundamental importance of the winemaker getting into the vineyard.’

Once down among the vines, Rose and her boss noticed the flavours in the juice changing at about 12% potential alcohol. ‘It started getting really flavourful, with real personality,’ up to between 13% and 13.5%, he says. With strict yield control and canopy management, Rose stripped out flavours that were ‘overbearing and hot... a tropical onslaught’, and arrived at a style that has definition, power and finesse, from the Y Series and up.

Rose and Hill-Smith seem to enjoy some sparring. He told me they have heated debates

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about how realistic it is to age Viognier. ‘Who is going to buy a 2003 Viognier when they see it on a wine list?’ demands Hill-Smith. ‘It’s a hand-sell at best. It doesn’t compute. I told Louisa it’s like trying to validate the virtues of a seven-year-old Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, which didn’t go down well with her.’ When, in London, I relayed her boss’s words to her, Rose said with amused disapproval, ‘He said that, did he? I thought those were supposed to be private conversations.’

While Hill-Smith throws his all behind Viognier, he agrees it has ‘a very limited audience in Australia’, and shakes his head over Rose’s quest to prove its ageability. At the same time, he relishes his fascination with Grenache (the Tri-Centenary bottling is made from an 1889 block) which, in marketing terms, is ‘a hideous place to occupy. Serious Grenache is an oxymoron in 99.9% of Australian wine drinkers’ minds’, he says.

This should not give the impression that Hill-Smith’s business sense is in any way lacking. From the beginning he has shown a ruthless drive to modernise Yalumba, particularly in the way he took over the winery in 1989. When he was appointed managing director in 1985, in his mid-30s, the company was owned by a mixed bag of shareholders – cousins, some 20 of them. It was an old-fashioned place. ‘It was as if we were driving a

Clockwise from opposite page: the iconic clock tower at Yalumba’s winery in Angaston; Robert Hill-Smith in the Yalumba Nursery; winemaker Louisa Rose; museum bottles in the Yalumba cellar include ‘Claret’, Riesling and a 1942 vintage brandy

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vintage car and all the rest were in up-to-date models,’ he says. ‘I’d been running the business for five years and I saw the realities – Y Series was not being made enough of, for example, at a time when Australian wine was just being discovered. I could see myself making it more successful, but I had no controlling equity in the business.’

So Hill-Smith’s branch of the family bought out the rest. His cousin Michael – who went on to found Shaw & Smith – was in London studying for his Master of Wine (fully paid by Yalumba) as the deal was being clinched, and one version has it that there was ‘a massive falling out: Robert stuffed Michael’, as one industry observer put it. Hill-Smith says there ‘was no antagonism’ and insists that he and Michael are good friends.

Interestingly, they both have the same crusading streak. Michael is forever beating the drum (*Decanter’s* Andrew Jefford has described him as ‘the friendliest face in Australian wine evangelism’), and Robert’s aim is to use Yalumba’s pedigree and knowledge base to improve the industry from the ground up.

Take the Yalumba Nursery, a project that, since its establishment in 1975, has grown to become a formidable operation that supplies the domestic industry from its selection of some 5,000 different combinations of varietals and clones – including table grapes. Compared to the big industrial nurseries, Yalumba’s is small. Its aim, Hill-Smith says, being ‘to keep us at the top of the game and to ensure the good people are challenged and with us’.

Leaving a legacy

Hill-Smith has little time for talk of evangelism – he insists ‘it’s more intellectual than evangelical’ – but then suggests ‘outreach’ is another aim: ‘to advise interested people in emerging regions’. I wonder if they would supply somebody with vines they considered totally unsuited to their region? ‘If a request came in from south Tasmania for Grenache, we’d sell it to them, but we’d also suggest varieties that are better suited.’

A proper husbanding of precious vineland – what he describes as ‘viticultural jewels’ – are key to Hill-Smith’s operation. He’s busily buying up valley floor vineyards; Hill-Smith’s father, who was more interested in the possibilities of Eden Valley, sold quite a lot of land. The 1889 Grenache block in front of the nursery came up for sale in 2001 and he snapped it up. He’s constantly on the lookout for prime sites to preserve. ‘It’s about controlling your destiny,’ he says. ‘Establishing a continuum.’

It’s all about preservation and education too. There’s the museum and library at the winery, which he opens up to young employees to show them the past glories of Australia and the great European vintages that can be hard to come by. There’s the Yalumba Nursery and its mission to improve clonal selection and then there’s the buy-back of old vineyards. Through all of this Hill-Smith is setting an example to the industry. Yalumba is ‘a wonderful old ship’, he says, ‘full of wisdom and winemaking ethos’. And he’s steering it much as he does his car, not without risk, but certainly with panache. **D**