Full transcript of an interview with

ANDREW PIRIE

on 13 May 2003

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

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Andrew, where and when were you born?

AP: I was born in Sydney, 3rd July, 1947.

Tell me a bit about your parents, Andrew. What did they do?

AP: My father was a medico, a general practitioner in the western suburbs of Sydney, as was his father before him. They were the pioneer doctors in the Liverpool district.

So it was very much a family event in those days I guess.

AP: You means in terms of -

The medico thing, generation after generation.

AP: Yes. In fact, all of my cousins are doctors. My mother’s family were more agricultural, and I guess at some point I started to drift in that direction in my high school years, visiting family properties and so on, and that finally led me to ag science.

Did you ever have wine on the table at home?

AP: Very rarely. Early memories of sparkling Rhinegold or something at Christmas, and I’m sure that’s the typical Australian story of my era.

So Andrew, you did ag science at Sydney?

AP: Sydney Uni, yes.

And did you go on and do post graduate work?
AP: Yes. I’ll follow the train here. I did ag science. In fourth year we had one unit of viticulture with a fellow called Graham Gregory. Quite a famous figure at the time. Graham at the time was a show judge in the Sydney Show I think, and he introduced us, not only to viticulture, but to wine appreciation and all those things. And a couple of years later I came back to him for some guidance. But it was Graham that probably opened the door.

In my residential college at Sydney Uni we started a small wine appreciation club in the late 60s. I think that we had an agricultural faculty conference in Adelaide in ‘66, and we were entertained by the faculty there. We went out to the Barossa and bought some wine at Saltrams, so table wine was starting to be drunk in our university circle in the ‘65/66 era.

It’s amazing how many people I talk to, Andrew, who had the same experience, that those were the formative years of their appreciation of wine.

AP: Yes. Very interesting. And at that stage in Adelaide people had their favourite suppliers, and there was bulk wine drunk at home. It would come down in a keg or something like that.

I did a Masters Degree in agronomy, (sounds like, straight in a pure) agricultural activity. In fact, I worked on tillage implements on black soils in the north west of New South Wales. I finished the Masters and cast around for a career, and at that time it was 1970, going into ’71. The Hunter Valley was just rolling in its current burst of growth at that time. There was quite a lot of profile starting to happen with the wine industry. I was keen to go to France. That was one of my vague objectives. I went to see Graham Gregory and said, ‘Look, if one were to go into the wine industry, what should you do?’ Graham suggested that I talk to Len Evans and to Bryce Rankine. I ended up talking to both of them, and the consensus was to take a trip to France, get to know the industry, drink a lot of wine, and then come back, which is what I did in ’71.
Did they open doors for you over there at all?

**AP:** Graham Gregory opened the door to John Avery, Avery’s of Bristol. I spent two months with Avery’s in Bristol. Did some work there for them in the cellars—hands-on sort of work. And then I went off to Burgundy, through their introduction. And would you believe, I’ve just got an email order from *(couldn’t decipher name)*, the negotiant(?) I worked for in Burgundy. They were linked with Avery’s. A group of my friends in Sydney are still apparently buying his wine. He makes very good Negotiant(?) white burgundies. So I commenced the big tour of France in ’71.

I had at the same time, through the University of Sydney, some sort of agronomic contacts. I can't quite remember why, but I was introduced and went to visit a couple of research establishments in the wine industry while I was over there. I remember, particularly, a guy called Max Rives, who was with the INRA(?), an acronym for CSIRO equivalent in Bordeaux, who'd been to Australia, and we had a discussion that Australia’s barely scratched the surface in terms of its regional exploitation. You know, there’s a lot more to come. And bearing in mind that about that time Margaret River was just being documented and so on. Am I moving about the right sort of pace?

**Yes, absolutely. This is excellent, thanks.**

**AP:** I spent a year in Burgundy, Alsace, Provence, Bordeaux. Finished on a very high note with a guy called Peter Sichel in Bordeaux—English wine family with interest in Chateau Palmer—and he became something of a mentor during my stay. Talked about what could be done in Australia, and he urged me to come back and try something new.

I also linked up at the time with two Englishmen who were doing the same experience. Quite a big pathway, particularly the English and Bordeaux type thing. There's a lot of people going through the industry. The two guys I linked up with actually were Os(?) Clark and Charles Metcalfe, both
of whom are now writing. We became, again, long standing friends. Actually the two of them are in that picture up there.

**Oh, yes.**

**AP:** Back in ’98/’99 when we launched our first sparkling wine. It was twenty-five years later when we got together as a threesome. I came back to Australia at the end of ’71, starting ’72. Had a look around in Sydney, and with my new found knowledge on French wines I started an advanced wine appreciation course, which was a way of keeping the wolf from the door. Went through all of the importers of the time, which included HG Brown, Douglas Lamb, and many others, who all gave me their imported range to sample for the public, and I created a series of wine courses that ran from ’71, on and off, until ’91. So it covered quite a span of drinkers in Sydney, and as many people in the industry. You know, that was part of their introduction to wine, was through my wine course, which was based on the Bordeaux curriculum of introduction to wine. And we did serious tasting of wine components at quite a reasonably technical level. I went back to Europe late ’72, having had a brief discussion with a fellow called Michael Mullins from the University of Sydney. He became a professor of horticulture, ex CSIRO Adelaide, division of horticultural research. I started asking all these questions about vine physiology, how do vines work in different climates. In about July ’72 I had my first trip to Tasmania. Already the early scribblings and graphs and comparisons had got me to Tasmania, so my own hazy recollection now is that obviously I did most of that work in the first half of ’72. Came down here, had a look. Graham Gregory had said, ’Look, there’s a fellow in the Australian opera called Claudio Alcorso who’s doing a couple things down in Hobart. Go and see him. I think aspect is going to be really important in Tasmania because it’s marginal’. No-one at that stage knew how marginal, or how ample the climate was for viticulture.
I did come across papers at that stage already from a guy called Prescott in South Australia who was a member of the Royal Geographical Society, or something like that. He’d written a learned paper saying that the dotted line for the cool climate limit of Australian viticulture was around Bass Strait, and that therefore the whole of Tasmania was off limits. This was a paper written in the proceedings of the Geographic Society in South Australia in 1969. So it was pretty recent dogma at that time that you weren’t going to get a lot of viticulture south of Melbourne.

**So you hadn't been here prior to that, Andrew?**

**AP:** No. That was my first exploration. It's known exhaustively that I came to Tassie from a scientific base, and people say, 'Oh, yes, that's really interesting, but didn’t your aunt live here?', or something. *(Laughs)* The answer is no. It was strictly an arms length choice. So I came down and had a look.

The numbers were quite compelling, and they're actually in that wine *(couldn't decipher word)* from the original comparisons. Not just because it was cool, but because things like humidity, evaporation, a whole lot of other things, lined up with the French regions, and no-one quite knew how they were important but there was a gut feel that they might be important. Interestingly, one of the other choices at the time was the district between Braidwood and Canberra, which stacked up on a temperature basis but didn't align with those other parameters. I also had a gut feel that the landscape would help *(couldn’t decipher word)* some of the answers as well, and what struck me really in the temperate regions of France that I was starting to model against was that they were sort of luxuriant growth regions. You know, there were lots of dense green forests and so on, and just didn't seem to stack up to Canberra. It was going to be the same sort of region, so I headed to Tassie.

**Had you talked to Claudio Alcorso by this time?**
**AP:** At that time I actually didn't get to Hobart. I came here and I met a real estate agent. It's interesting, there's a great history of this in the wine industry of people all wanting to reinvent the wheel themselves. I met a real estate agent who’d shown an American investor around the area, and he said, ‘Look, I know exactly where to take you’, because he’d nearly bought some land for vineyard. He took me up to west Tamar. I eventually was taken across to meet a guy called *(couldn't decipher name)* Miguet, who was the Frenchman from the south west of France I think who had been out here on a hydro scheme in the 50s. He’d settled in Lalla, which is just north of Launceston, and had planted a few vines. He’d got them from Allan Antcliff in the CSIRO. CSIRO actually used him as a little bit of a pilot research station in the same way they used Claudio Alcorso. There was quite a strong link between Alcorso and Allan Antcliff and Possingham, and also between John Miguet and those guys. I went up to see Miguet—I was just back from France, so it must've been on that ’72 trip, or might've been ’73—and tasted Pinot Noir from his vineyard. After spending quite a lot of time in Burgundy it was really interesting to taste Pinot that actually had a strong varietal Burgundian character. And Miguet therefore was the pioneer of Pinot in the modern era because Claudio Alcorso didn't produce Pinot initially. You're going to see Don Martin?

**Yes.**

**AP:** He will go through all of that. And then Graham Wiltshire surfaced, and I think somewhere between ’74 and ’76 I was working with Graham on the beginnings of a vineyard association out of Launceston and so on. So he was definitely in the picture as far as I was concerned then. But in December ’73, just prior to that, where I was today—would've been roundabout June/July ’73—I saw 70,000 cuttings of Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Chardonnay, the first batch from Griffith, New South Wales, from the Department of Agriculture. Actually to be more accurate, from an employee of the Department of
Agriculture, a guy called Mario (couldn't decipher name)—sticks in my mind for some reason. He sourced them from the district, from McWilliams I think, and from Penfolds. We brought those cuttings in before we had a site. So we already had some conviction at that point that this was the place to be, just needed to find the right dirt.

**When you say we -**

**AP:** My brother at this stage joined me.

**That's David?**

**AP:** Yes, David Pirie. He's still alive. He was looking for a career at that point, and I reckon it would've been June '73 that he moved down with his family—having trouble finding the site. The land ownership and the local soils issues and so on were quite complex. We’d put a deposit on a block of land on the east Tamar, which is right next to a vineyard now, and we got an independent expert to look at it. He said, 'The soil's a bit shallow'. So we pulled the pin on that particular block and started looking further afield.

We kept the cuttings—the importation—coming in. My brother moved down and we planted a small nursery up at Low Head, which is just a coastal sandy area. Grew the vines there and kept looking.

Eventually, by spreading the word and my brother living here, a member of the Georgetown Council said, 'Look, the soils that you describe that you want are out at Pipers Brook. They're deep red soils, gravelly. Why don’t you look out there?' We did. Almost instant success. We found a block. Paid $100 an acre for this red soil country, which is on these round top rolling hills. I remember going on to the site December '73 for the first time. No fences, no power, no buildings, just bare soil site. We started the project rolling then, and therefore we started planting in probably June/July '74.

At that stage Graham Wiltshire was on the Tamar. I think in about those same months he put together an investment syndicate who were looking for land, and they ended up buying next door to Pipers Brook sometime in
'74. They planted in '75. So the two biggest vineyards in Tasmanian history were planted in '74/75.

**So was your block 90 acres there?**

**AP:** We bought 150 acres in the total block. It came from a guy called Frank (*couldn't decipher name*) who was a wood miller. We planted 17 acres in ’74, we planted about another 6 acres in ’75, and we planted a little bit more Pinot in ’76. And so we planted the whites in the first planting, Cabernet in ’75, and Pinot in ’76, which came from Murray Tyrrell in the Hunter Valley. And then we sort of got rolling.

**Were there any problems in those first plantings with the natural environment? With animals?**

**AP:** Huge problems. It was just mind boggling.

**After all the searching.**

**AP:** After all of that. You know, we were mug viticulturists really. We were mugs in the sense that we’d never done it physically before. Had a lot of knowledge.

I went to France in ’74, courtesy of the French government. I got a travelling scholarship that they hand out, and actually spent six weeks touring all the regions I’d been through, being conducted by technical experts.

I developed a plan, including a trellising plan, and planting densities and all those things for future vineyards, and I was able to use that knowledge in the new vineyard. So we had very good fundamental knowledge, roughly the right varieties, roughly the right trellises and so on, but we ran into fundamental things like huge wild life problems.

We put electric fences around the property without realising that all the animals were still inside. Our first year was lost really by all of the little vines getting eaten off back to the wood. They struggled to emerge again, and they got eaten off again. So we had to tame the environment.
And then there were massive phosphate deficiencies on these red soils. Most people’s experience of these red soils is that they are potato growing country that’s been farmed for 100 years and everyone thinks that they’re incredibly rich, but in their native state they’re extremely poor. Very strong phosphate fixes because they’re full of iron oxide, which fixes phosphate, particularly at low pH.

**Not unlike a lot of other Australian soils.**

**AP:** Yes. These are particularly deceptive because they look so rich. It was interesting that when I started to plant vegetables they just turned yellow, and it was clear that, boy, they weren’t happy and something fundamentally was wrong. It was just that everything was wrong. The organic matter was low, the pH the low, the phosphates were low, the potassium was low, nitrogen was low, and the bloody thing’s barren. And so we struggled for years to build the fertility, to get the things to grow.

That was the physical issues. Probably as we rolled into that era—1976 is the year that sticks in my mind that I met the Director of Agriculture in Hobart. We were looking for our first bank loan, and we hit a brick wall because the Department of Agriculture had officially declared that viticulture would be not encouraged in Tasmania. They’d done a very basic bit of work and they decided that it was too risky, and they wouldn’t back it as a crop. So the Bank manager said, ‘Well, how can we give you a loan if the Government says that you shouldn’t do this?’

I went to the Director of Agriculture. They didn’t really change their mind for a couple of years after that, but that was one of the earlier problems. And at this point it was just Heemskerk and ourselves really that were rolling. Moorilla in its original site expanded a little bit, and then eventually a new project called Bream Creek came out of Moorilla as a separate syndicate, instigated by a guy from the University called Dr Bob (sounds like, Min-ar-ee), who was a lecturer in agriculture. So, if you like, Pipers Brook and Heemskerk were the two initial enterprises that—we had both
strong connections, myself and the sort of European circles, Graham through Fesq & Co, who’d come to him through a sailing connection, and between us these sort of sent some roots into the wine industry. That sort of rolled through.

I wrote for the Finn Review in this era—‘74. ‘73, I started the PhD because Mike Mullins got sick of answering my questions.

**TAPE 1 - SIDE B**

So Mike Mullins in Sydney was getting sick of your questions and suggested you do a PhD.

**AP:** I said, ‘Look, I don’t understand how vines work. What happens if you’ve got a region that’s actually a little bit cooler than some in France, but the sun’s warmer?’ Those sorts of questions. Eventually he said, ‘Look, why don’t you come and work on it and I’ll try and get a research scholarship’, which is what happened. It also obviously gave me a burst of credibility in terms of the project.

Mullins had come fresh from South Australia. He was keen to bring viticulture into Sydney Uni. We embarked on a project in ‘73, which had a strong impact of the environment on the way that vines function, so I was able to build in a fair bit of what I was doing in Tasmania into the thinking. So that was a parallel group.

My brother then was the hands-on person at the time. I started the PhD. I remember getting on a plane in Sydney one week and carrying on an infiltrometer(?)—a devise that measured the infiltration rate of moisture into soils—that I had borrowed from the soils science lab in Sydney Uni to go and test the site that we were looking at that we thought might’ve had surface sealing problems. So you can see the way I used the university to help our search.
I continued through until ‘77, which were the formative years for the vineyard. And ‘78, I went to lecture and join Brian Croser at Charles Sturt University. It was then the Riverina College of Advanced Education. I joined Croser, Andrew Hood, who is now winemaker in Tasmania, and Tony Jordan. We were all there in that year. ‘78, I spent a year there essentially teaching viticulture, working with Croser. And then ‘79, I was ready to move to Tassie. I thought we were getting close to lift-off. First vintage was in ‘79. It took five years to get a vintage, which I think was an indication of how tough the initial years were.

I came down in ‘79. Started writing again for the Finn Review as a way of keeping some dollars rolling. Then I was offered a research fellowship with the Reserve Bank of Australia. Kept filling out forms, and this one worked, so got a twelve month fellowship with the CSIRO. I elected to take it at food research labs in Ryde in Sydney, and I worked on potassium in grapes. It wasn’t a productive research year but it was very useful at the time.

Finally came to Tassie at the end of ‘79, after a vintage. We did a vintage ‘79, got our first wines on to the market probably late ‘79. I moved down early ‘80, and the enterprise rolled forward.

**That first vintage, Andrew, what varieties were** -

**AP:** The first wine that really hit the deck was, in those days, called a Rhine Riesling, ‘79 vintage, and we produced about 150 cases of it. We sold it in the early days mainly through a single retail outlet in Sydney called Rosewell Cellars, and the Sydney base, because I was running wine courses, became quite prominent. We classed it as our *(couldn’t decipher word)* market place. I think we sold the wine at around $4 a bottle direct from cellar door.

At that time Croser had launched the Petaluma label, in about ‘77 I think, so he’d set a bit of a pattern for this new era. I remember the year—I think it was ‘79—that he put his price up to $6.50 for his Riesling.
Everyone was aghast at the huge price jump. Most of the table wines were in the 2s and 3s.

So you’d built a winery by this time?

AP: 1980, we’d built a skillion shed, which is still standing at Pipers Brook, and commissioned some Humes water pipes into wine tanks. Stood them on road culverts, put some valves in them and we got underway. And basic winemaking equipment from Peter May in Adelaide, who is still a wine industry supplier.

So where does he work now—Peter?

AP: Peter May was with Lallemand. Used to be Wine Industry Supplies. Don’t quite know where he is now. We bought our basket press through him. So we got going in ’79 with this tiny winery. Interesting for the record, that in ’78 we did pick a very small number of bunches, and I actually flew the must in stainless steel cans on the plane back to Wagga with me, and I made the wine in Wagga. We did actually bottle a few bottles of ’78 Riesling.

So where had you got your winemaking experience proper from? Is that from your French days?

AP: I had all the foundation from France, including very detailed recipes from the initial experience, but in particular I got a second scholarship in ’79 that took me back on a winemaking (couldn’t decipher word), as they call it. I did the rounds for six weeks, gathering recipes, talking to technical experts in each of the French regions, so really strong sort of French background again, which is pretty relevant because the tradition for making things like Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer and so on in Australia were pretty slim in those days. But the pivotal point was probably in the year spent at Wagga where all that experience was matched with what Croser was doing. He brought the Californian sort of experience with him, including what I’d call the protected(?) winemaking philosophy, which is very different to the French.
So those two things came together. In 1980 I was doing a little bit of each.

We then moved forward, and by about ‘82, if you read some of these, we were starting to make waves with wines like the ‘82 Riesling, and starting to get written up in the Sydney and Melbourne papers. Quite interesting at the time that people like Hickinbotham and (couldn’t decipher name) were really becoming significant. And the beginnings of the wine papers, the Melbourne Age, (sounds like, living page) and so on. So that’s sort of early 80’s, getting global recognition.

Were you still being encouraged from your Sydney base, Andrew, by some of those people who’d pushed you in the direction initially?

AP: It’s interesting. Probably at this point, this was getting pretty way-out for a lot of Australians. You know, this idea that Tasmania was going to be a place where it happened was just pushing the limit a bit. Margaret River was –

Yes. That was the boom.

AP: - getting there. I remember in ‘79 I met up in Bordeaux with Halliday, Evans, Croser. They were all there because it was the time when they had the French chateau. I remember we tasted together a bottle of Moss Wood from probably the mid 60s.

‘68 probably.

AP: It might’ve been a ’75 Moss Wood that we drank in ’79. It was something like that.

Hang on! Moss Wood wouldn’t have been picking in ‘68. It would be early 70s, yes.

AP: It was one of those 70s wines, and we all tasted it in Bordeaux and thought, wow!, this is looking pretty interesting at that point. But Tassie was right on the edge. I tasted a few Rieslings this year from Alcorso and
actually I encouraged him to send me some for my wine course in the 70s. It would've been his ‘74 and ‘76 Rieslings. I was very excited and I thought, wow, we are on track. Graham Wiltshire was doing Cabernet. It was his ‘76 I think that really attracted a lot of attention through these circles.

**Is it still very much trial and error on the ground down here though?**

**AP:** Right now?

**No, no. This is ‘79/80 we’re talking.**

**AP:** Trying to quote the French experience and give an Australian destination, and some things seemed to be working right off. Like, I made an ‘82 Cabernet that became a classic. It was only our second year, and we thought, wow, this is definitely right. We started to talk about the Bordeaux district being transplanted down here. And then the wines from ‘83 onwards really started to be miserable. So there were conflicting messages. And we had Pinot come through. I remember the ‘81 Pinot. Halliday wrote that up as being the nearest thing to Burgundy that he’d seen. So we thought, well, maybe it’s going to be Pinot. And then we had trouble making it.

And it turned out that a lot of what was going on was that if we made the wines in the Croser style, which was protected(?) winemaking, they seemed to work, but it wasn't at all the classic French recipe. When we used the French recipe, the wines seemed to fall apart. Part of what was going on was that in those early production years the wines were pretty fragile. They didn't have much constitution. If you oxidised them, which is how the French traditionally made their complex styles, the wines just fell apart, particularly in wood. Whereas if you protected them, as we did with the first Pinot, just didn't give it any wood at all, they had beautiful fruit character.
That went on for really the next twenty years—from 1980 to 2000. We were sort of just bouncing around, trying to get the right match of vineyard maturity, recipe, winemaking technique and so on to all line up. Our pivotal year at Pipers Brook was probably '98 when we started to realise what was going on. Prior to that, it was trying to marshal resources, or pointing in one direction, get more vineyards and more winery, and more capital backing and so on, but it all started to click about '98. 2000, a lot of people will say was when it really started to click. Each year now is just going in a snowballing fashion I think, in terms of the knowledge base. And people like Andrew Hood and ourselves and others moving from this point of slight confusion to suddenly grasping what was going on.

**So was it adjusting to the micro climes, those mini environments -**

**AP:** It's like troops going to war. You sort of walk over the dead bodies, and eventually there's enough bodies in the trench that you get to the other side. We were trying to be both. *(Laughs)* We were trying to do it in one leap really, and in essence for the people who started on one side to really cross to the other side in one leap was a huge ambition.

**Was there interest from some of the bigger winemakers on the mainland in what you were doing?**

**AP:** Yes. I met two guys in Bordeaux while I was there in '71, Ray Leske(?) and Ross Heinze(?) from Penfolds. They were with Seppelts in those days. They were both vineyard managers, and one was at least based at Drumborg for Seppelts. And you think, ah, there's another one of the early pioneering regions. Drumborg had been underway in the late 60s. Seppelts had come and had a look at Tassie, particularly west Tamar, and thought that it looked reasonable but it's a bloody long way away and isolated, so they didn't take it any further.

Croser had been down here in the early 80s to have a look. Over the years there were a succession of people coming through, looking. Bear in mind that New Zealand was starting to go through a parallel period of development. Tassie was always too small, too difficult, too fragmented.
Really it was mainly a case of the early seeding of the industry. The big three at the time were always considered to be Pipers Brook, Heemskerk and Moorilla. The three commercial pioneers, if you like. They acted as the nucleus for the experimentation, and little vineyards spun off the sides and slowly rolled. And then I think Andrew Hood moving down here—must’ve been the early 90s/late 80s—really added another important step in terms of winemaking expertise and so on.

And then what happened was that the vineyards became mature, but also the site selection issue started to become resolved. Trellising methods—dramatically different requirements down here—started to get resolved. That ‘98 sort of breakthrough was also when Scott Henry hit the State. There had been Lyre trellis through Graham Wiltshire and the French connections in early 70s, which was very successful, but Scott Henry took it another step up I think and it was introduced into vineyards in ‘97 and ‘98 and had a very big impact I think on quality.

What were people like Robert Hill Smith doing down here? Is that more marketing?

AP: Interesting. Robin Nettlebeck, who’s still with them -

Yes, I know Robin.

AP: - was in Tassie looking at one of the vineyards we eventually bought around ‘86. He was encouraging people to plant sparkling blocks, and one of the vineyards that we produced the Pirie label from was one that he was a bit interested in. I don't know why he was here. I think Robert must've sent him to come down and have a look and see what was going on. That interest hung around, but it was chiefly Ed Carr through Seppelts and Andrew Pike at Penfolds in the early 90s that drove the large company interests. And they started buying substantial trial batches of fruit for mainly sparkling, and by I think ‘92, ‘93, ‘94, there were substantial batches of base wine around that were really attracting a lot of attention, and I think the Janz wines from that era had really lifted the awareness of what was going on down here. I think one of Graham’s big contributions
was the sparkling story in Tassie, which I think he very much one handedly pioneered. I can't think of much activity prior to that, so I think that was a very important part of the history.

**Andrew, by the late 90s when you'd been learning for all those years, had you moved to other varieties, or saying that these are the varieties?**

**AP:** We had quite a big nursery programme, and luckily in ’89 we took over a vineyard called St Patrick’s vineyard, which had a complete collection of all of the introduced clones at the time. Came from the Department of Ag, and they’d come from CSIRO Merbein, so we had in fact a vineyard with every known vine in Tasmania in one vineyard and 5 vines up to 200. So by 1990 we were making Pinot Gris, Viognier, there was a bit of Shiraz there but didn't stay for long. We had all the Bordeaux varieties, including Petit Verdot. We had Grüner Veltliner. We had all those things just scattered around the place, and I started playing with some of them. Pinot Gris emerged very quickly as something that viticulturally worked. Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon were more difficult but we made one very good wine from Sauvignon Blanc. So, yes, we were already starting to spread our wings a bit at that point.

(Tape restarted)

**AP:** Let's just try and sum this up.

We had Riesling kick off straight from the late 70s/early 80s. ’82 Riesling was one of the greatest wines that we've ever made. Gewürz the same, and it's now considered one of the benchmarks in Australia. Cabernet started to fail in Pipers Brook by the late 80s because the denser canopies weren't coping, despite some very good early wines. Pinot was starting to emerge, but one of the things we didn't realise was how critical the site was, and Pinot on eastern slopes was light. It needed a north face to actually produce full body in the Pipers Brook area.
The difference between the sub regions wasn't probably fully understood. We were starting to realise that Pipers Brook was a lot cooler than the
Tamar. Like, a two week maturity difference for the same variety. We hadn’t fully put that together into a strategy that you should put the early varieties at Pipers Brook and the later ones in the Tamar, but that started to emerge probably in the 80s. So it was really business with the initial selection up until—I planted a new vineyard at Pipers River in ’86/87, and that was 50% Chardonnay and 50% Pinot, and that sort of gave it a rating of what we thought was important by then. And partly for sparkling, partly for table wine. We weren’t quite sure how it was going to pan out.

I think by ’90 we were starting to get actively interested in Pinot Gris, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon—just played around with it—and by ’93/94 we were starting to get some stronger fixes about what was working. Pinot Noir started to pull ahead of the pack because of its joint flexibility for early ripening for table wine, and for sparkling wine on the less successful table wine sites. So that sort of takes us through to the mid 90s and, you know, viticulture was starting to spread through the State and somehow people collectively started to back Pinot, I think because it was almost a unique selling point. It wasn’t working so well in many other regions.

**So Andrew, how did it feel by 2000 to realise that after all those years—twenty-five years—you’d actually begun to crack it?**

**AP:** I thought I was very privileged that, as I say, rather than being a body in the trench, I was still standing. *(Laughs)*

**It must’ve been an amazing sense(?)**.

**AP:** And to actually be CEO of a public company that had grown to about 30million capitalisation was a very privileged position, but from ’98 onwards we were in a position of risk because we were public and we were exposed to all the risks of takeover, which finally took me out. Yes, 2000 was something getting close to an incredible position.

Just going back. This is back to ’85. This was Mark Shields, wine writer -

**Yes, I know Mark.**
AP: - doing a review. ‘Pipers Brook Chardonnay 1984, price to be announced’. (Laughs) That meant we hadn't decided what to charge. ‘Soon to be released. This is the best Australian Chardonnay that I've tasted, bar none. It defies description, save that it's very French in style. Be quick to order, there's very little to be had’. So this was ‘85 Sun Herald, Sydney.

Well, Mark Shields would've been one of the few really pushing the cooler climes I think, wasn't he?

AP: He was. And he tasted that wine out of barrel, and for the next twenty years that wine continued to be quite an important wine in our history. And he picked it, just like that. I had a great respect for his perception.

A lot of people have said that to me about him, that he had that.

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AUSTRALIAN WINE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT. Interview with Andrew Pirie on 13th May, 2003. Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Andrew, having gone through an overview of those twenty-five plus years at Pipers Brook, what would you say were the critical events that actually shaped Pipers Brook over that time? We’ve mentioned some.

AP: That's probably one of the hardest questions to answer very quickly. The French experience at the beginning was pivotal because it gave me a glimpse of what we were aiming for. I think the agricultural science background and the climatology work that I did gave me the conviction that there was no physical reason why we shouldn't succeed, and I think I needed that conviction to keep going because it was looking a pretty hard slog there for some time. So I think without that sort of scientific background pushing me we might've got bogged down or sunk in the
swamp. So there were a couple of prerequisites there. I think then the rest of it was just evolution.

Yes.

AP: Probably there were just a whole lot of things on the way, like the French trips—the whole sequence of trips to France to gather some of the knowledge. The year at Wagga with Croser and co were very pivotal I think in looking at modern technology as opposed to French tradition. Then down the track, probably in ’98, it was gathering together enough resources to really start pushing the thing forward at a great pace. Like, we were fully capitalised, we expanded hugely—rapidly—and we had over 220 hectares under vine by ’99, and it just gave us the momentum and the resources to manage rapid knowledge expansion.

I’m really struggling to find a pivotal moment.

It's more evolution.

Did the Government down here ever give any encouragement at all? You said in those early days they didn't even want to know you.

AP: Yes. I wrote an article on the eve of the Bass by-election, which is pretty important in Tasmanian political history. I think it was 1975 when Senator Newman was elected. The Finn Review wanted me to write something topical and I wrote about the potential for wine, that Tassie, instead of the apple isle, was going to be the great isle, and that wine would become important in a hospitality sense, and that wine and food would start to work together in Tasmania. It was sort of an early forecast of what we call wine and food tourism that’s now happening, and the Government’s totally embraced it.

If you start in ’75 with absolutely no-one having a clue what it meant, by 2000 I was a Director of Tourism Tasmania. The State was adopting a wine and food strategy. We’d sort of gone from totally outside of the Government to actually totally within the Government, and we were a very integral part of the State’s new look, if you like, by the late 90s. So ’96 I was appointed to the State Tourism Board, and I think that’s about the
time when the State really started to embrace what we were doing. Up until that point, yes, it was such a left field activity that people struggled. If you talk to the community down here, it became one of those rise in the industries that seem to have a glimmer of new hope in a time when there was a lot of negativity in Tasmania, and now that it is really booming it's a small icon industry in Tassie. If you talk about the wine industry, most people come up with a fairly positive response. And I think we've been able to harness enthusiasm.

The industry’s still at a point where it's just rolling into viability. I mean, it's still getting there in terms of people understanding how to harness it and make it economically viable. But the Government has certainly become a key part of the new State look, and from that perspective we've now got all the support that we ever dreamt of.

Andrew, as Pipers Brook was building up, and you were learning more about it, you said that initially your retailing outlet was really Sydney.

**AP:** Yes.

**Did that keep -**

**AP:** Sydney remained a key foot in the market. Talking to the guys at Coonawarra and sort of talking about markets, there’s a reluctance from an Australian rural person to go and set foot in a big city. I was lucky in the sense that I was running this sort of dual empire—you know, Sydney/Tassie—and, very luckily, it meant that I kept one foot in the markets. 80% of our mailing list would've been Sydney based in the early days.

**So you were working off a mailing list?**

**AP:** Very strong. We sold up to 80% of our early produce direct, and therefore we didn't need a big trade presence, but we did get it because of the media coverage that we had. So we essentially went sort of Sydney, Melbourne. Tasmania was very difficult in those days because there was
no credibility down here. People didn't expect to drink wine when they were in Tassie.

Then we went to UK in the late 80s and started an export strategy. Our UK distributor in '92 became Pol Roger Limited, the champagne house. We had quite an innovative entry into the UK. So Pipers Brook rolled out to the world. Probably the biggest thing that I pioneered was the idea that you just don’t sell in your domestic market, you take it out to the world. And we were selling to fourteen countries by the late 90s on a fairly substantial scale.

**So what sort of percentage of your output?**

**AP:** About 25%. But we were growing 20% a year, so to maintain 25% we were having to do quite a lot of new work. You know, we’ve got Ninth Island Pinot into Tesco—550 outlets by 1999/2000. A lot of this is really recent. I understand that Pipers Brook sold 14,000 cases of Ninth Island and Pipers Brook in Tasmania in the last twelve months, which is just huge given the time frames. You know, ten years ago it would’ve been 200 cases. So it’s an extraordinary measure of how the society’s changed in that period.

**Andrew, lastly, if it's alright with you, where to now? Bit of a big question.**

**AP:** *(Laughs)* One of the projects that I stumbled across in the course of Pipers Brook looking bigger was the idea of maybe getting involved with an icon producer in each major area, or activity, and to put under one banner a top Riesling, a top Cabernet, a top Pinot, and take them to the world in one company. That's how Parker Coonawarra came into the picture. So when I was getting eased out of Pipers Brook I sort of picked up that Parker connection, and have now run with it, and keen to now build a consulting base. It looks like I’ll have three clients in Tasmania to add to that.

And the last one, and possibly one of my long standing ambitions, has been to merge the academic stream and the thirty years practice into a book,
which will be on the components of *(couldn't decipher word)*—what makes it all click. I think I’m now uniquely placed to put that together with the sort of PhD vine physiology and thirty years (nearly) of wine growing experience, and try and tell the public, as much as the scientific community, how I think it works. That's my fifth day of the week, or the seventh day of the week the way it's emerging. But that's just starting to roll forward as well.

**Well, thanks for talking with me, Andrew.**

**AP:** That's a pleasure, Rob.

**It's been really great.**