

A New Acquisition: Viticultural Society of Victoria

In 2013 UMA acquired the Viticultural Society of Victoria (VSoV) collection, a valuable addition to existing wine industry collections at UMA. The society was formed during Melbourne Show week in 1905 by a group of leading wine industry figures and is Australia's oldest wine society. The records track the development of industry policy following Federation and illuminate the role played by a number of the leading wine merchants, such as the Seabrook family.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw fortunes slowly wane in gold prospecting while there was increased recognition of Victoria's grape growing potential - the time was ripe for investment in viticulture. Many influential men in business and politics such as Joseph Best,

Hans Irvine, who purchased Best's Great Western vineyard and Hubert de Castella, founder of St Hubert's Vineyard, took advantage of these near perfect conditions and so the fledgling viticultural industry began to flourish. By the 1890s, Victoria was Australia's leading wine manufacturer, producing over half the country's wine stock. However this initial period of prosperity came to an end due to a number of factors: the spread of the devastating European vine disease Phylloxera; the looming threat of tariff reduction by an unsympathetic government; a strong temperance movement which successfully lobbied government for stricter alcohol laws and a seemingly disinterested public. All of these factors contributed to a decline in the industry.

The UMA records provide a rich source of primary material documenting the early days of the VSoV in an era dominated by tea drinking. The VSoV was an influential group and a number of its members had links to powerful allies in politics, agriculture and industry. They would meet regularly at the RACV building in Bourke Street Melbourne, where they would work on strategies to revive the industry and stimulate interest in wine. The VSoV provided the viticultural industry with a united voice that enabled more effective lobbying of government for help with the major problems of the day such as the fight against Phylloxera. The records show how the government-appointed viticultural expert, Francois De Castella, achieved success with his radical approach using 'rootstock' to fight the disease and save Victoria's vineyards.

The VSoV had its own constitution and over time it established its own customs and traditions. Members were expected to wear the society's crested blue tie to all VSoV events; these included wine tastings that kept members in touch with changing local and global trends. Annual luncheons became de rigueur - menus in the collection provide a wealth of information about the changing culinary attitudes and mores of Victorian society during the twentieth century, evidence that 'Filets Mignons Printanier and a glass of claret' were once the order of the day.



Viticultural Society of Victoria, 2013.0070

Photograph annotated as '1908 Wine Judging Royal Melbourne Show',

Left to Right W.E. Lillie, W.J. Seabrook, Wine Steward, Stewart Johnson, W.W. Senior.

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Sources: David Dunstan (2013), *A Vision for Wine: A History of the Viticultural Society of Victoria*, End2End Books, Hawthorn.

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