

At Home in the *Vines*

Story and Images Marilyn Collins

One of the most admired homes in Hunter Valley Wine Country is “Binbilla”, on Broke Road Vineyard Broke, nestled in the picturesque foothills on a 100-acre country estate overlooking a boutique vineyard and lake-size dam.







Once a dairy heartland, the Broke district is known for producing some of the best-quality wines in the Hunter and is a popular tourist trail for visitors frequenting the growing number of cellar doors and gourmet produce venues.

This elegant country homestead features a rendered finish, tall ceilings and wide timber verandahs and has been finished to the finest standard, with quality inclusions.

For the owners, it is more than a place to “hang their hat” when living between their two other homes – one on the eastern side of Sydney and the second in south-west France, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, which they are currently renovating. “Binbilla” is a realization of a dream and is a property which has heartfelt connections with the owners.

The couple came to Australia from London on a holiday in March 1999, and during that period visited friends with land for sale in the Broke Valley, a 25-kilometre drive from the heart of Pokolbin. Broke is part of Hunter wine country, still referred to by the locals as “the tranquil side of the lower Hunter Valley”.

With a dream of planting a vineyard and returning to their homeland after many years abroad, they purchased 100 virgin acres. During the same trip they organised for soil tests to be undertaken to determine suitable grape varieties.

To commence the building of their home, they made contact with Stibbard Homes, a building company based in Singleton, as well as construction workers who would later build the road in from the main road, dig out a 30-meg dam and commence establishment of the eight-acre vineyard.

Managing Director and designer of Stibbard Homes, Neil Albert, said his initial brief from his clients was to create a home which had a relaxed rural feel and could cater for frequent guests but maintain a degree of privacy for all.

“The floor plan had to be all-encompassing, incorporating generous areas for both formal and informal entertaining both internally and externally, whilst at the same time taking advantage of the views over the property to the Brokenback Ranges beyond.”

On their return to London, the couple planned the design of their dream home and via a fax machine they worked on the final plan with Neil, who then submitted building plans to Singleton Council.

“We wanted a big house – one to be a typically colonial Australian,” explained the owners, “a house that would look as good in 100 years as it does now. Wide covered wooden verandahs, screen doors, big decks and big views were part of our vision.” >





Entertaining friends and family was the way of life for the owners, so having the luxury of open space it seemed only proper to build a spacious home. Five bedrooms, four bathrooms, office, kitchen/family, formal sitting room, entrance hall, laundry, double carport, double garage and the all-important tractor shed and wine cellar seemed just about right for their needs.

Neil Albert said the resulting plan utilised a series of interlinked pavilions, now a hallmark of Stibbard Homes' designs, each with its own individual function.

"The guest pavilion and owners' pavilion are positioned at either end of the dwelling to provide the privacy requested. Appreciating the owners' love of cooking, I gave careful consideration to the size and layout of the kitchen, which became the centre of informal living space. When not entertaining guests, the owners live in an area which has the feel of a smaller, more intimate country cottage."

Returning to Australia in October 1999, the couple luckily found a cottage to rent in the nearby Broke village, enabling them to be "on the spot" once construction began.

Before the end of that year, the vineyard was well under way, the dam was almost finished, a road into the property had been established and power connected.

On 1st March 2000, Stibbard's turned the first sod and the house was on its way. Exactly eight months later to the day, the official hand over of the keys marked the big day. "Stibbard's were exemplary and almost eight years later the home looks as good as new and there is nothing we would change," said the owners. >



Whilst there is a formal entry into the home near the garages, the obvious first calling point for anyone visiting the property is to take "the back door" off the verandah entry, which is accessed from a roundabout garden which features plantings and a stunning specimen magnolia *Graniflora Exmouth*.

As with most country-style homes, informality is the keynote feature, and as the majority of the time is spent in the kitchen and family room, this space has become the heart of the home. The white timber kitchen and open-plan family room is nine square metres, with a very high raked ceiling. The kitchen boasts almost 14 square metres of work surface, a large range cooker, a spacious pantry and the essential cool room - a luxury but a necessity, being a 50-kilometre round trip from the nearest supermarket.

The warmth of stained blue gum timber floors as well as the kitchen benchtop adds to the country feel of the kitchen, which is definitely French inspired, with tasteful accessories and decor.

The master bedroom extends off to a separate pavilion from the informal living space. Walking via a hallway lined with bookshelves, just like a library, you pass a study and step into the spacious bedroom with walk-in robe. The en-suite bathroom has been decorated with large Italian tiles floor-to-ceiling, with the luxurious comfort of underfloor heating, much appreciated on icy cold winter mornings. Every morning the owners can survey the entire estate when waking.





The spacious formal lounge is in the centre of the home with French doors opening onto the covered verandahs, which is the perfect place to survey the entire estate and vineyard. A feature of the formal room is a stunning white marble mantle fireplace.

Down the corridor are the guest bedrooms; one has access to a powder room; one has its own en suite and all can enjoy the luxurious main bathroom with deep, soaking bathtub and floor-to-ceiling Italian marble tiles adding a touch of luxury.

All living and bedroom areas are surrounded by verandahs of varying depth, which provide plenty of options for outdoor entertaining or to follow the sun or shade, depending on the season or time of day.

Once the home building project was completed, the couple's attention naturally turned to the establishment and ongoing care of the vineyard.

On reflection, they said the planting of the vineyard proved frustrating, with underwater drainage issues and a short change in the Shiraz (year in advance) rooting order.

"At the time, we nervously made up the deficit with two acres of Sangiovese. This was a blessing in disguise as wine made from this variety was exceptional, as was our Shiraz.

"Not satisfied with two varieties and wanting a white to blend, we grafted another two acres of Shiraz to Viognier. Adding Rose' to this list gave us the possibility of five different wine varieties and we are proud that several vintages have won top awards."

The next contractor was the landscape company, who built the rose terraces and entertainment area down by the dam and some three years later, the in-ground swimming pool and its enclosure. >



“The garden design and sourcing of plants and trees was a huge challenge, done entirely by us and fraught with our determination to defy nature, the Broke weather and our dream of shady European trees. We won, we lost, we learnt and today it’s wonderful to see those same trees soaring high – knowing that one day they’ll tower over the house, adding even more character to the property.”

Despite the hungry kangaroos testing their patience by eating the rose garden bare, and all the dust and the parched, cracked earth in the drought, the couple has persevered and now the garden is rewarding them both for their efforts.

Recent heavy, long-awaited rain has eased the workload and everything in the garden is robustly growing.

Equally at home on the property is a flock of eleven tame geese, which live a superb, carefree lifestyle meandering around the confines of the lawns and enjoying their space on the lake-like dam.

At present, the couple is balancing a very busy life, travelling between their three homes and meeting business demands which are drawing them back to Europe.

“ We feel a great sadness knowing we will have to move on in the near future because of our lifestyle; we hope the next owner will love it as much as we do and also love our geese, who come with the package - they were not bred for the table!”

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