

Stranger Things: Wirra Wirra celebrates 125 years of bizarre history

It's not every year you turn 125. To celebrate the milestone, Wirra Wirra Vineyards is releasing a book that salutes a century of winemaking history — and the eccentric characters behind it.

Katie Spain, Wine writer, SA Weekend
Subscriber only

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It's a tale of two blokes (one a cricketer, one a chook farmer), a multitude of hairbrained ideas, and a lot of plonk.

Wirra Wirra was established in 1894 by South Australian cricketer Robert Strangways Wigley. Under his watch, the brand's shiraz was exported to England and beyond – until Wigley's death in 1926.

Without him, it fell into disrepair – until 1969 when the late Greg Trott (a grower of things) and Roger Trott (a chartered accountant) purchased a property that had been abandoned for 40 years.

They set about rebuilding it – stone by stone.

MORE ABOUT WIRRA WIRRA

■ [McLaren Vale's Wirra Wirra secures investor for 5-star resort](#)

It's apt that a man with McLaren Vale dirt on his gumboots and farming in his veins forged Wirra Wirra's next chapter. The late Greg Trott had an entrepreneur's eye and a farmer's heart, a balance that served him well.

McLaren Vale locals must have thought they were bonkers, but armed with timber salvaged from the Pirie St Methodist Church, some newly quarried ironstone, a truckload of tenacity, and a hell of a lot of help from their mates, they rebuilt the grand old beast from the ground up.



Late SA winemaker Greg Trott at Wirra Wirra winery at McLaren Vale. Greg never met Wirra Wirra's former owner, but the pair shared an insatiable love of cricket and eccentric tendencies. Few in the region are without a yarn about "Trotty's" antics, vision and quirks.

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He never wore a watch.

Not since losing one given to him by his father in 1947. From that day forth he turned his back on time (and sentimental objects).

He didn't see this as a hindrance, quite the opposite. He swore he could estimate the time according to the sun and was subsequently late (sometimes by days) to everything. They were the good old days. A sense of fun underpinned everything Greg did.

He worked and played hard – wearing light soled, dairy gumboots while he did it. He even wore them to formal black tie dinners – just in case he was suddenly needed in the winery.

Fun followed him wherever he went.

“The cellars reverberated with music from an industrial sized hi-fi set-up. His favourite Beethoven, Bach and the haunting strains of pan flutes and organ that were the rave at the time,” says pal and former workmate Tony Brooks.



SA restaurateur Pip Forrester with winemaker Greg Trott and Scott Collett at McLaren Vale and Fleurieu Visitor Centre.

Greg was always busy and full of ideas. He even had grand plans to build a residential cricket oval – complete with world-class accommodation overlooking the pitch.

The aim was to attract visiting teams and stars of the international game. Even Les Burdett (curator of Adelaide Oval until 2010) was said to be behind the idea. It didn't eventuate but together, Greg and Tony embarked on plenty of outrageous antics.

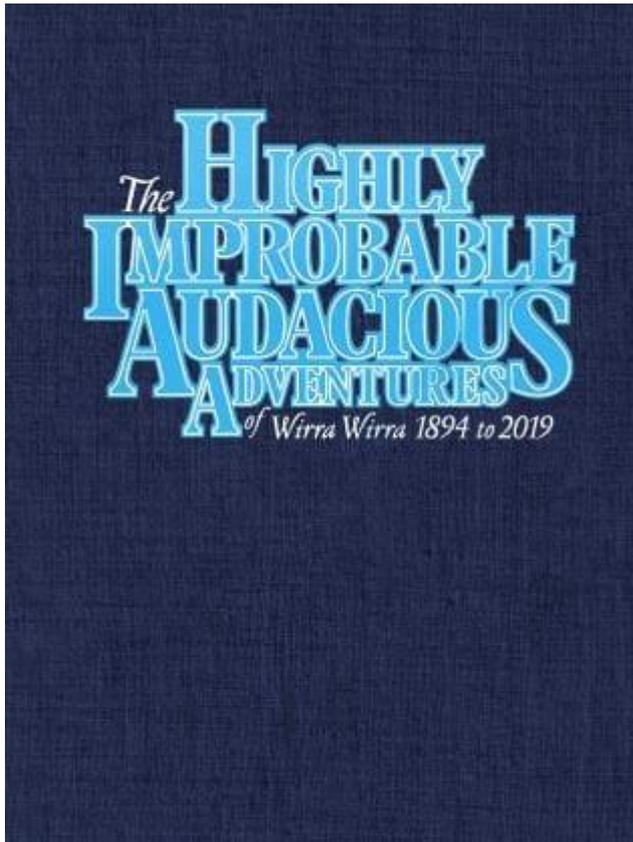
Their creative collision of minds resulted in Ferret Legging days (the English coal miner's tradition of putting ferrets down trousers as an endurance test).

Still in use today is the winery's medieval siege machine (built to catapult flagons and watermelons across the winery grounds – and with which to challenge other wineries).

Then there's the giant bell that tolls to mark the beginning of each vintage.

Greg even tried his hand at a venture into vermiculture to pioneer a new vineyard fertiliser program based on worms. He took great joy in talking about wild ideas over convivial dinner parties with colourful characters, inviting guests based on their potential for animated conversation.

Of course there was the wine.



The Highly Improbable Audacious Adventures of Wirra Wirra 1894 to 2019 by Andrew Kay, Nick Ryan, Katie Spain and David Brookes

The Church Block has been the brand's hero wine since 1972. It was originally a grenache shiraz blend with the emphasis on grenache but Brian Croser (of Petaluma and Tapanappa fame) helped re-work the style in 1983 when it transitioned to the current cabernet/shiraz/merlot blend.

Booze aside, underpinning it all was Greg's devotion to bringing people together, stirring conversation and supporting others in the industry.

Ben Riggs, chief winemaker at Wirra Wirra from 1988 until 2002, has fond memories of the man he calls a mentor in life.

"He epitomised why you get into the industry," Ben says. "If someone did well, he would genuinely enjoy their success. I remember watching that and thinking, 'That's a good way to be'."

On August 31, The Festival of Wirra Wirra will celebrate 125 years of history. The family-friendly event features food trucks, wine tastings, live music, children's entertainment and firing of the catapult every hour on the hour. Guest wineries include Mr. Riggs, Samson Tall, Stargazer, Ministry of Clouds, Longline, Year Wines, Wines By KT, BK Wines and Koltz – all run by winemakers who cut their teeth in Wirra Wirra's cellars.

Festival of Wirra Wirra, August 31, 11am- 4.30pm, 255 Strout Rd, McLaren Vale, bookings essential, \$30 per person (includes entry and festival glass), under 18 free, wirrawirra.com

The Highly Improbable Audacious Adventures of Wirra Wirra 1894 to 2019 by Andrew Kay, Nick Ryan, Katie Spain and David Brookes is released on August 31. Available for \$50, Wirra Wirra cellar door.