

Frere: Bringing Champagne to Australia

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A glass of champagne is more than a simple drink; it symbolises luxury, style and celebration. Steeped in rich French history and culture, the beverage has been passionately developed throughout the growth of Australia's own wine industry. The result is the world-class variety of sparkling wine that we have today. It is wonderful to know that the roots of this development lead back to Albury and, more specifically, to the literal explosion of champagne in the centre of town.

Since the German families of Fraunfelder, Schubach and Rau planted their first vines in 1849, the Albury region had become scattered with vineyards. Prominent Albury figure and first mayor, James Fallon, pushed the worldwide potential of the recently developed wine region and became a strong leader in this new Australian product. He was personally invested in his initiation of Albury-produced champagne through his ownership of east-Lavington's Murray Valley Vineyard in 1867 as well various cellars in Albury and Melbourne.

Fallon had travelled to France for the Paris Exhibition in 1873 to promote Albury wine. While there he met winemaker Leonce Frere and persuaded the recently broke Frere to come to Albury to help him manage the vineyard with the goal of producing champagne. Leonce Frere arrived not long after and was paid well for his expertise.

Fallon's Cellar on Kiewa Street was built with the capability to hold 250,000 gallons of wine and was structurally secure with thick timber beams. Frere managed the processing of champagne production using his French traditions, methodology and skills for the Australian landscape.

In January 1876 people near Fallon Cellars on Kiewa Street (where Quest is now) were disturbed by an explosion of a commercial-quantity amount of champagne.

It was the heat of an Australian summer that proved too much for the wine. The temperatures could not be low enough for the safe housing of champagne. As a result the bottles exploded and a great loss of a whole vintage occurred, not to mention the shock from the cellar's neighbours.

What this experimentation meant was not lost on the future of Australian wine. James Fallon is recognised as the producer of the first champagne in Australia. The loss from the explosion was great but it also acted as a catalyst for further progress.

While working for Fallon, Leonce had plans of his own. In 1876, Frere and his recently-arrived brother Jacques Gustave, purchased 90 acres of land in Thurgoona. The brothers built houses, planted a vineyard and excavated a large cellar and winery to create *St Hilaire*, named after their French hometown. The Sydney Mail's report on 'Viticulture at Albury' in November 1886, noted the beauty of St Hilaire; the 'cottage stands on a hillock, and around it is a prettily laid-out garden; while the

vineyard stretches away down the slope to the north, south and west'. Among the many plants were olive trees planted from a seed brought on the journey over from France.

The first vintage is estimated to have been in 1881 and in 1882 Leonce left Fallon's employment and devoted his expertise to St Hilaire full time. The vineyard prospered. While producing a variety of wines, Frere's belief and hard work in developing and promoting local champagne continued to be strong. He had found that the French style of Burgundy grapes did not work as well here. White Hermitage was best and a large portion of the vineyard reflected as much.

In 1886 St Hilaire produced 2000 bottles, with expectations their production would double the next year. By 1899 offices in Sydney had been purchased for the purposes of retailing the wines. The scale of production had increased significantly and the winery was updated to improve efficiency.

The expanse of Albury's vineyards grew, however it could not last at that level. In the early 20th century, due to a combination of the outbreak of vine disease, phylloxera, and governmental red tape, St Hilaire, like many others, became less and less productive. The last production of wine was in the 1940s. While there are still wineries and hobby vineyards in the area, Albury never returned to that same level again.

Evidence of the vineyard continues in what is now known as St Hilaire Estate. The cellars and vats are visible from what is now a suburban

street. The house is still there too. Landscape designer and estate cartography illustrator, Catherine O'Neill, has carefully restored the house for the last thirteen years, bringing to life a large part of the memories of the St Hilaire house, wine and the Frere families.

Two olive trees, now well over 100 years old, still stand tall near the house. These trees, growing in the midst of Thurgoona's suburban development, bear fruit similar to that of the ancient Roman or Greek trees.



Boys working at St Hilaire Vineyard, ARM 18.811.02