

The story of Samson Tall

Story by **Kate Le Gallez**. Photography by **Robert Geh**. Styling by **Marcus Syvertsen**.



Page left: Heather Budich, Paul Wilson and their dog Miller at Samson Tall Winery and Cellar Door. Above: The winery on the right has been sensitively designed to echo the pitch of the roof of the old church.

Driving around McLaren Vale, there's a few names that come up again and again. McMurtrie and Strout lend their names to roads threading through the vineyards. The Pedler name is bestowed on a road, a creek and a cottage. But Samson Tall? An early settler in the region, Tall has nary a dirt track to his name. That is until Paul Wilson and Heather Budich chose Samson Tall as the name for their winery.

Located on McMurtrie Road, Samson Tall – the winery – makes its home in the Bethany Wesleyan Chapel built in 1854, while Samson Tall – the man – now rests in the cemetery out the back. 'Samson started the property and so we thought it was important that he would be honoured in the naming of the property,' Paul says. In so doing, Paul and Heather have tapped into a rich history that they now respectfully wrap around their own endeavours on the site.

That history begins with Tall's arrival in South Australia in late 1839. He headed straight for the southern vales to establish his property 'Burrington Farm.' In 1852 he transferred a half acre of land to the Wesleyan Methodist Society for two pounds and two years after that, the Bethany Church opened.

My first view of the chapel as I come along Strout Road is not dissimilar to that which would have greeted congregants 165 years ago. The building cuts a sharp figure in the landscape, its strong peaked roof matched by a trio of arches above the door and two windows at the front of the building. These arches, offering the curtest of nods to Gothic revival architecture, are the only adornments on the otherwise simple building. Few changes have been made over the years. The original thatched roof was replaced with galvanised iron in 1890, and then replaced again after a storm in 1949. The pug walls ('1850s rammed earth,' explains Paul) have been rendered with concrete and clad with iron in places to preserve the structure. >



Above: Wines are available by the glass or the bottle and visitors are encouraged to bring their own picnic and enjoy the wine and the friendly surrounds.
Below: Games are available to play on the lawn and dogs are always welcome.



Above left: The interior is casually furnished and filled with artwork by Paul's brother Mark and old friend Michele Wilkie (in collaboration with Lynda Robinson).
Above right: The old cemetery is now an exclusive area to remain as a place to pay respects.



It was very important to be respectful of the church and so the only brief to the architect was that the pitch had to match,' says Paul. 'The outside is heritage galv and the wooden frames and the wooden doors – everything is really a homage to the church.

The chapel closed its doors in 1967, but has been reinvented many times since, including as a tennis club, a cycling club and, ironically given its current occupants, a temperance society before it began to fall into disrepair. Around twenty years ago, with its back wall a crumbled wreck, it seemed the church would be knocked down, until Chris and Doug Allen stepped in and bought the place. They did what Paul terms 'the heroic renovation,' completely rebuilding the back wall, shoring up the structure and renovating the interior to use as a bed and breakfast.

The manner in which Paul and Heather eventually became the next custodians of the chapel tells you a lot about their thoughtful nature. The two had met while working at Wirra Wirra and they'd regularly make the drive from the winery to Heather's parent's house – a path that took them past the Bethany Chapel. At the time, Paul was studying to become a winemaker having resigned from his marketing job at an international wine and spirits company, while Heather worked in events and marketing. 'Eventually we just started to think that the church would make a great winery cellar door,' explains Paul. But the church wasn't for sale. So, for eight years, the couple wrote to the Allens: 'it was in the diary every January,' says Heather. And four years ago, they finally secured their prize.

After two more years running the church as a bed and breakfast, the couple began the process of converting it into a cellar door and winery. The church itself required few changes. The most stunning is perhaps the resurrection of the original 166-year-old Baltic pine floorboards that had arrived in Australia as ship ballast. Stripping back the yellow-based stain revealed the natural beauty of the timber and they now almost glow underfoot. They also added a new deck to the rear of the building which draws people outside to views of neighbouring vineyards, and filled the walls with art by Paul's brother Mark and old friend Michele Wilkie (in collaboration with Lynda Robinson).

The winery next door has also been sensitively designed. 'It was very important to be respectful of the church and so the only brief to the architect was that the pitch had to match,' says Paul. 'The outside is heritage galv and the wooden frames and the wooden doors – everything is really a homage to the church.' While it's 'just a shed,' it's been thoughtfully constructed: 'it's a pretty shed,' as Heather puts it.

Their respect for the history of the site has seemingly paid them back in big and small ways. Design 'compromises' like a lean-to office to work around the roots of a majestic gum only add to the >



Above left: Paul is topping the French Oak Fudre. In barrels (or Fudre) there is evaporation of wine. Whiskey producers call this evaporation 'the angel share.' The oxygen that forms in the top of the barrel once it is not full anymore can be detrimental to the wine, so regular topping ensures there is no oxygen.
 Above right: The gravestone of Samson Tall (1788-1875).

As lichen makes its slow march across Tall's gravestone behind the winery, his legacy is being given new life through the work of Paul, Heather and their family as they add a new chapter to the story of Samson Tall.

winery's striking profile, while their commitment to learning the stories of the past continues to surprise and delight them, assisted by the careful research of Jill Wilson, Ruth Baxindale, Pat Uphill and Jan Strout.

They now see their own business as an extension of that history, but it's not as a result of a 'created brand,' says Paul, his former marketing persona briefly surfacing to express some distaste at that notion. 'We're just lucky that all that stuff is here,' he continues. 'And because we've been true to the history, every time a piece of history comes in, it fits very quickly into the story because we haven't deviated from the truth.' One such factual treat is the presence of Richard Pommery in the cemetery. Pommery helped build the church but is also directly related to the Pommery Champagne house in France, a coincidence that clearly tickles Paul and Heather's imagination.

As this story goes to print, Paul and Heather are readying to re-open the cellar door after a two-month closure over winter. The break reflects their family-oriented approach to the business which is very much an equal partnership. 'We share everything from cellar

door, marketing, winemaking, children,' says Paul. 'We don't have employees. It is a complete family business. So, in the middle of vintage when it's very busy, everyone has to work, kids as well.' It also means they've set limits on what and how they want to do things. The break is one example, but they also only sell their current range of five wines directly (rather than through a distributor) and they don't offer food at cellar door 'because it's not what we do well.' 'We just want to keep it nice and simple. We say bring a picnic,' adds Heather.

I immediately imagine my two boys racing around the back lawn while I sip a glass of one of the two rosés in the range come spring. It's my kind of simple and, apparently, it's pleasing to the man himself too. Paul and Heather have it on authority from a visiting psychic that Samson Tall is very happy with this new use of his land and his name. Lichen now makes its slow march across Tall's gravestone behind the winery, his legacy is being given new life through the work of Paul, Heather and their family as they add a new chapter to the story of Samson Tall. 