



Universal appeal

Investing in a visually appealing winery does not mean Michael Hill Smith is leaving the Universal Wine Bar. He intends to spread its reputation, **DAVID SLY** writes.

THERE is a saying that when the wine industry reaps great profit, the Pharaohs of Bordeaux and the Napa Valley build their wineries into great monuments, to bear their family name. This sardonic observation wasn't lost on Michael Hill Smith when it came to planning the Shaw & Smith winery on a picturesque site at Balhannah late last year. As the first of the new-generation wineries to be built in the burgeoning Adelaide Hills region, Hill Smith and his cousin Martin Shaw wanted the look of Shaw & Smith winery to make a significant statement. However, the cost was always going to be a limiting factor for this small winery.

Hill Smith worked with Christopher Connell design, Asbroek Engineering and JBG architects to meet an agreeable compromise; make it typically Australian by using cost-effective Colorbond but with a smart design ethic to give the building presence. Now the winery, with a capacity to process a 500-tonne vintage, is completed - sweeping views; lots of sheet glass; a funky, thoroughly functional look and feel through its office space and laboratory; a chic lounge; a long, wide pergola on to which a spaciou dining room opens and a professional kitchen is attached. This last feature has given rise to much speculation and rumor about Hill Smith's other commercial venture - the Universal Wine Bar.

With Hill Smith - pictured, with Martin Shaw on the right - having transported his office to Balhannah, whispers suggested his interest in maintaining the Universal had dimmed and that he was waiting for a buyer to offer him the right price. An animated scowl crosses Hill Smith's face as he recalls the gossip. He says sternly that the Universal is not for sale. "It's a valuable part of what Shaw & Smith is about," he says. "And it doesn't matter whether I'm based in that building or not. The Universal has had its own manager since the day it opened. They do a wonderful job. And now they have the additional role of catering for functions here, hitting the same excellent mark they perform on a daily basis at the Universal." This signals that maintaining consistency at the Universal is highly important to Hill Smith. It also states the winery has no intention of becoming a restaurant; its dining room is a showpiece for invited winery guests. It is worth noting that sales and tastings on the Balhannah site are only by appointment.

Hill Smith concedes that two years ago he had to decide whether he wanted to be director of a wine company or a restaurateur. He already had vague plans for an ambitious franchising of the Universal concept, with Sydney and Singapore likely locations.

Building the winery took precedence over the franchising plan - "and thank God I didn't go down that disastrous route," Hill Smith sighs. But the decision forced him to consider the function of the Universal in Rundle St. He looked at the consistent swag of awards collected for its wine lists, food and service, and decided it was of too great a value to part with.

"It's easy to forget how special it is to have every great wine person who travels through Adelaide finding their way through the Universal doors," he says.

"So many great wine students have worked there. And we continually have outstanding teams of people on the staff. For the Universal to continue to exist, it has to be relevant - and I believe it most certainly is."

In talking about his philosophies behind the wine bar and new winery, Hill Smith shows himself to be fussy about shooting high and maintaining standards. Indeed, he sees no reason to compromise with any of his interests. "Great wine has always been the point of difference with the Universal," Hill Smith says, crooking an eyebrow. "And it always will be with Shaw & Smith, too."



PARTNERS: Michael Hill Smith, left, and Martin Shaw.
Pictures: GRANT NOWELL

