



The Rebirth of Canberra District in the 1970s

The first known vineyard within the Australian Capital Territory was established at Narrabundah in the late 1920's, when an Italian family planted grapes in land allocated by the Territory for the development of orchards. From discussions held with a family descendent, Mr Bin Forner, it has been found that his uncle (Mr Clem Forner) arrived in Australia on 23 October 1924 on the same boat as Mr De Bortoli, who subsequently went on to establish a wine empire at Griffith, NSW.

Clem moved from Griffith to Canberra to work in the newly established ACT in 1925. When orchard leases became available at Narrabundah, he planted 3 acres (1.2ha) of red and white grapes, described by Bin Forner as making 'Chablis' and 'Cabernet' style wines. The two families (Clem and his brother Martin) successfully made wine from these grapes for consumption by family and friends right through to when the ACT Government began shortening the leases in the late 1950s.

As Canberra became further established as the nation's capital in the 1960s, the influx of politicians, bureaucrats, builders and businessmen created a demand for wine, which stirred a commercial interest in growing grapes for local wine production.⁷

The rebirth of the Canberra wine region as a commercial operation occurred when a few pioneers began to plant grapes in small acreages. Notable among these were two CSIRO scientists Dr Edgar Riek and Dr John Kirk — colloquially known as the two Doctors. Profiles on these two pioneers are provided later in this chapter.

Helm and Cambourne⁷ also reported that Max Blake, a Research Officer at the John Curtin School of Medical Research, established a trial plot of about 100 vines on his property near Bungendore in 1968. That site was also abandoned several years later and in 1973 he planted 10 acres (4ha) of grapes at Shingle House (Brooks Creek) on the Bungendore Road.

In 1970, Noel McAuliffe planted a small vineyard on the 'Treeless Plain' near Yass, comprising 300 vines of semillon, riesling, cabernet sauvignon, and shiraz. This small vineyard also grew very good grapes and is reported to have produced a small quantity of wine, but did not go into commercial production.



One of the early Canberra District Vineyards