



Picture: DEBBY COLLINSON

Bottle opener

“I don’t smile!” Bob Willis said when I mentioned that he never smiles on television.

Coaxing a smile out of Bob Willis is not easy. Friends of his tell me that they have been trying to get him to smile for years. But as you can see in my picture – he really can do it! I swear that the next time I saw Bob on television commentating on the first England v Sri Lanka Test he was a touch animated.

When *Spitting Image* was at its height, they did a feature on English cricket. The voiceover was two men discussing how dull it was to be fielding. The camera then panned in on Botham and Willis sitting at a table, full kit, under a sun umbrella, drinking from glasses, trimmed with fruit and little cocktail umbrellas!

So Bob, when did you first become interested in wine?

“I began my cricket career with Surrey in 1969/1971 and went up to Warwickshire when the wine bar scene was just starting in the winter of 1971. I have always enjoyed wines from the New World – Rosemount and Hardys were pioneers of Australian wine into the UK”.

Australian wine grower Geoff Merrill

DEBBY COLLINSON asks the man who used to open England’s bowling about his taste when he’s opening his wine

who was featured in *The Long Room* two years ago after the writer had been invited to help with the harvest is now a business partner of Bob.

“I first met Geoff in Adelaide in 1978 when, sitting in the bar at a hotel, I was being rather derogatory about Australian beer which I don’t like,” says Bob. “This Australian voice, attached to a heavily moustachioed man, came booming across the bar ‘If you don’t like our beer you had better try the wines!’

“For the past fifteen years Geoff and I have been talking about doing a wine venture together with Ian Botham and three years ago it came to fruition. It is called Botham Merrill Willis but is often abbreviated in speech to BMW. It is available in Tesco.

“My first wine memory experience was bad. I am not a fan of highly tannic red wines or heavy Italian reds,

unlike Ian who is a big fan of Italian amarone and Spanish priorato, but not me – they are a bit bold for me. The styles I like are chardonnay, shiraz and cabernet sauvignon.

“I start the evening with a glass of riesling, gewurztraminer or albarino and then move on. My first port of call for reds would be rioja and then Australian shiraz or New Zealand pinot noir. Another great wine is that made by Gyles Webb at Thelema Mount in South Africa. I don’t keep a cellar, I buy what I want when I want it. It gets drunk too quickly to lay it down!

“I had a memorable trip to Rioja with Geoff and a friend just a couple of days after Diana’s demise and went to Marques de Riscal where they sent me down to the cellar to choose a 1961 gran reserva to toast her life.

“The most expensive wine I ever drank was a petrus which cost £680. Fortunately I wasn’t paying, as I didn’t care for it!”

And does he expect to be raising a glass to toast English success in this winter’s Ashes series?

“It was joyous to beat Australia in England but to beat them in Australia – there would be nothing like it. The Oz fans don’t like losers – just winners!” ■