

Accepting nature's will

Winemaking as handcraft

"If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours." — Henry David Thoreau, circa 1840.

By ADAM GIBSON

Massive hailstorms had, just days before our arrival, decimated crops in the New England region. So when my wife and I met Doug Hume, he was in the vineyard picking off individual hail-damaged grapes by hand, bunch by bunch, vine after vine, row after row.

A man with his enthusiasm and energy could often be disappointed in people when it came to enlisting help and participation in the various food- and wine-related community projects and committees he was part of, Hume explained in the first few minutes of our meeting him.

He was thus amazed that when a natural calamity such as this befell his precious, hand-reared organic crop, in contrast he could cheerfully and calmly accept nature's will.

Walden Woods Farm, he explained, was named after the famous philosophical memoir by Henry Thoreau, *Walden*, or

Hand-picked, dryland-grown (without irrigation) and of course organic, Hume's wines are refreshingly different from most Australian whites on offer.

Life in the Wood.

The farm is built and run based on Thoreau's philosophy of living with fewer essentials, intertwining with nature and acting with integrity.

We began to feel that perhaps Hume was not your average farmer. A former marine biologist, he studied in Hawaii.

While at university, he took up big-wave surfing, became a student of Zen Buddhism philosophy and cleared tables at a five-star French restaurant to pay his rent.

Being surrounded by exceptional food and wine proved irresistible. By the time Hume graduated from university, he was working as the restaurant's resident *sommelier*, cutting his teeth in the wine industry tasting and recommending the finest wines in the world.

Walden Farm and his prize *Pinot Grigio* vineyard is a long-term manifestation of some of those early passions. Hand-picked, dryland-grown (without irrigation) and of course organic, Hume's wines are refreshingly different from most Australian whites on offer.

He exclusively grows *Pinot Grigio* grapes as he believes them best-suited to the cooler, high-altitude environment of New England, which produces wines reminiscent of those of northern Italy — light, crisp and acidic whites created to be enjoyed with food.

Indeed, the countryside through the region is as much a reminder of Tuscany and Umbria as it is of its namesake England, with its rolling hills, granite outcrops and rows of pencil pines creating scenic wind breaks around paddocks.

Organic production for Hume is as much a matter of obligation and logic as it is one of principle. Unwilling to have chemical sprays and toxic substances on his property, he was quick to point out that most top French wines in the world were also produced organically, if not certifiably so.

The French *vignerons'* inherent distaste for perceived bureaucratic interference often prohibits them from submitting to certification processes. They prefer to rely on the obvious difference in quality in the end product as justification for remaining chemical-free.

Hume's neighbour, fellow winemaker and winemaking teacher, Scott Wright, agreed. After a number of years winemaking in the Stanthorpe region as winemaker and becoming concerned about the effect of pesticides on his young family, he struck out on his own by establishing Wright Robertson vineyards and cellar door five years ago in his wife Julie's native Glencoe.

Going organic was not a hard commercial choice for him after visiting an organic farm in New Zealand while on holidays



Doug Hume and Nadine McCrea at Walden Woods Farm.



Wright's farm's organic status is now the crucial point of difference between his wines and his ubiquitous and much larger competitor's products.

Tasting the flavours of New England at Wright Robertson vineyard.

and tasting what he calls "real produce" for the first time.

The fact that the farmer lived in a beautiful house and drove a new Mercedes Benz as a result of his organic operation sealed the deal for the ex-Kyogle cattle producer and he has not looked back since. Like the Walden Woods philosophy, a step back to traditional methods, before the advent of chemical crop management, seemed the only obvious choice for Wright.

Since then, Wright's label, Wright Robertson of Glencoe, has enjoyed strong support from the parochial local community. His wines are hand-pressed and barrel-fermented on site, and thus "handcrafted".

His 2006 Cabernet is young, green and fresh, evocative to me of long summer lunches in the garden – a refreshing divergence from our traditional "big" Aussie reds and completely drinkable on a warm day. The pick of his crop and Wright's personal favourite, to make and to drink, is the Wright Robertson 2006 Chardonnay.

It may be that we sampled this wine cool and straight from the cask, standing among the barrels in open discourse with the winemaker on a fresh New England afternoon, but this particular drop has managed to change my attitude to chardonnay forever.

Oak and vanilla and a natural yeastiness make this wine smooth and light, yet with the depth of character that Wright assured me was the true nature of a chardonnay. Forgive me for stating the obvious, but this wine tasted, well ... natural, which at the end of the day is what organic wine is all about. I loved the stuff.

Despite increasing pressure from corporate takeovers of local liquor outlets (and the subsequent centralised buying process that cuts him out of the equation), business is growing and Wright is now ready to distribute to boutique outlets in Brisbane and Sydney.

He said organic certification of his product became more important the further away from home he went, and ironi-

cally was the main reason he was able to feasibly plan an entry into the export market in the next year or so, and distribute his wines for North American and European consumption.

Not bad for a small boutique winemaker from a largely undiscovered wine region of Australia. Originally a personal choice to ensure the good health of his family, Wright's farm's organic status is now the crucial point of difference between his wines and his ubiquitous and much larger competitors' products.

Wright and Hume agreed any problems with growing organic vines in their region were vastly overshadowed by the advantages in commercial and agricultural terms.

The main concern is the amount of time and energy that go into removing weeds, and a lot of effort goes into preventing disease on the vines due to restricted options for treatment.

Interestingly, bunch rot (a disease common in mainstream wine production) does not occur at either Doug's or Scott's farms despite being a persistent threat at neighbouring non-organic vineyards in the area.

On the other hand, the slightly lower amount of fruit produced per vine per season results in a concentration of flavours in the grape, improved taste and quality of fruit – all of which give rise to the exciting emergence of a range of organic wines that stand proudly beside the best the New England region, and indeed Australia, has to offer. ■

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Adam Gibson is a freelance writer and ideas consultant to the health and wellness industry. He spent New Year's Eve with his wife Fiona touring New England, canoeing the Nymboida River and sampling the above-mentioned wines in earnest in front of a campfire.