

Viticulture & winemaking

Organic wine gives flavour of region

SCOTT WRIGHT demonstrates how organic wine can bring out flavours unique to a region and shares some methods behind the success of the Wright Robertson vineyard.

Our family operates a small organic vineyard and winemaking business at Glencoe, just south of Glen Innes in NSW. We grow four hectares of wine grapes.

The vineyard, Waratah Ridge, planted in 1999, has been managed organically. We also still have a wide involvement with the conventional industry.

The vineyard is quite cool at 1140 metres above sea level and has about 1380 growing degree days with a mean January temperature of 18.3°C.

Varieties grown include pinot gris, riesling, pinot noir and shiraz. Initially, cabernet sauvignon was tried but the season proved too short and the vines were grafted to pinot noir. We are also in a summer-rainfall zone and have high disease pressure during the growing season.

The path to organic production started in 1994 for me when I visited a long-managed organic vegetable farm just out of Christchurch in New Zealand. That visit gave me a glimpse of the future of organic production.

The vegetables grown on that farm had an incredible depth of flavour and the soil was amazingly soft due to extremely high organic-matter levels.

I guess I see organic certification as one component in my philosophy of trying to bring out the true flavours of this place. We combine organic methods with a dry-land production system and hand-make wines with minimal intervention.

For really high-quality wine production, I would rate a dry-land vineyard the most important factor. I find the organic

and dry-land components of our operation work together to produce a very natural and uninhibited wine.

So it is that we do not irrigate, we manage our vines organically and operate a very low-tech winery with quite low extraction levels. We seek to achieve intense flavours in our wines, yet hopefully bring into the wine unique characters rather than the usual ripe fruits that dominate modern Australian winemaking.

Our region is quite cool and we do not necessarily chase body in our wines but are content to produce medium-bodied, elegant wines.

Our desire to have organic certification has been quite longstanding and in many ways has been a journey. The most important aspects of the organic system, as I see it, are to remove modern synthetic fertilisers from the system and slow the plant down through restricting water.

Once you remove the fast-paced growth in a vine, which I believe is caused through excessive water and nitrogen, then the resultant fruit is a more correct expression of the terroir of the vineyard.

The other interesting development when we remove excessive growth caused by synthetic nitrogen and water is a massive reduction in diseases and other stress levels.

Good nutrition, however, is a must in an organic vineyard. I am not a minimalist or zero-input producer. We subscribe to the Petrik management system to improve our soil health because we have some concerns about the biodynamic approach.

We have also moved to green manure crops and compost application from commercially prepared chicken manure pelleted fertiliser. I believe a key to building a robust soil is developing high levels of organic matter and humus.

Foliar nutrition inputs play an important role in our vineyard, particularly Petrik products. As a rule of thumb, we would apply one litre of both fish emulsion and seaweed each time we spray. These play a huge role in reducing the effects of moisture and mildew pressure.

In the 2002 drought our vineyard was one of few vineyards in the region to show no visible signs of stress despite extremely low rainfall.

Our oldest vines produce in the order

Grapегrower Scott Wright and son Stuart: wines true to the vineyard in which they are grown.



of 1.8 litres per vine in a good season down to less than half in a drought year.

These are low figures by most standards, yet the wines from our organic vines are much more balanced naturally than those produced from conventional vines in the region. Natural in the sense of acid, sugar, tannin and length, which means less (if any) chemical intervention in the winery.

Marketing of our wines is both direct to consumers through our cellar door and to local restaurants and bottle shops. It is heartening that we have been able to market all of our wines within our New England region.

One of the strengths of the modern food

and wine industry is that consumers have really opened up to the produce of their town and region.

Once you remove the fast-paced growth in a vine, the resultant fruit is a more correct expression of the terroir of the vineyard.

We do not pretend that our wines are the best in the world, plainly they are not. They are, however, true to the vineyard in which they are grown. I guess there is nothing quite like drinking the fruits of your vineyard.

"It is the flavour of this place," we like to say. Our organic management gives us the assurance that the flavours really are of this place. ■

Contact: Scott Wright, Wright Robertson of Glencoe, New England Hwy, Glencoe, NSW 2365; phone: 0422 203 817; email: scott@wrightwine.com.

Red or white it must be green

By JOHN O'MEARA

Environmental concerns were at the forefront of many presentations at the Winery Engineers Association (WEA) annual conference held in Bendigo in August.

WEA president Geoff Leighton said this year's conference theme was 'the challenge of economies': "The question is basically, 'Is bigger better'? The evidence is that it is not necessarily so," he said.

With more and more medium-sized producers being swallowed up by the wine giants, the promised efficiencies are not always being realised.

"If companies continue with very diversified product lines, they are not getting the scale of economies they were looking for," Leighton said. "The big companies get a pyramid structure looking after the brands below."

In such a landscape, small producers can reap the advantage of being lean and nimble. A smaller company that keeps a tight range of product can do very well, Leighton said.

Small wineries are flourishing. The past four editions of James Halliday's *Wine Companion* have listed just a tick under 1000 new wineries. Many of these operations are tiny, producing as few as 200 cases a year from weekend plantings.

Their labels are seldom seen in the wine mega barns. They live by cellar-door sales, mail order, supplying local restaurants and by exporting to a surprising variety of destinations, including Denmark, Ireland, Japan, Germany, Canada and Malaysia.

Amy Russell, of the Winemakers Federation of Australia (WFA), is managing the Australian Wine Industry Stewardship pro-

gram looking at the future of the 'Wine Australia' brand. At the WEA conference, she had a stark message: British retailers are going to set extremely high environmental standards.

The challenge ahead for grape growers and winemakers is to be able to clearly demonstrate they produce wine sustainably and with provable consideration for the environment.

Interestingly, Russell said there was little evidence that retail consumers here or overseas placed much emphasis on biodiversity or 'green' products. Drinkers, it seems, are more concerned about flavour and getting a bargain. The pressure is coming from the European Union environmental directives and the even more demanding environmental assurance programs of big retailers such as Tesco and Marks & Spencer.

Russell said that British importers have embraced the idea of corporate social responsibility and want to show a commitment to the 'triple bottom line'. Whether by regulation or selective buying, these considerations are going to affect viticulture and winemaking at all levels.

Winemaking is all about looking forward. In an industry in



Dusk at Frogmore Creek Winery.

which vines take at least three years from planting to cropping and a sound vine can take 20 years to hit its straps, long-term planning is of the essence.

The issues Russell raised may take 10 years to really bite. But 10 years is tomorrow in the wine industry. Even small block producers who have no intention of exporting would do well to check the WFA website and follow the detailed reports of its industry stewardship program.

Russell's talk was neatly bookended by some practical advice when Jo Clark, of the Victorian Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), discussed reducing waste – and saving money – in wineries. Cleaner production, she said, was about "understanding what waste is and how it can be turned into profit through smarter use of materials and processes."

The inputs – grapes, energy and water – are expensive, as are the outputs – emissions and waste. So Clark's message was simple: reducing inputs and reducing waste and emissions can save money and add to profitability of the business.

Her emphasis was not on the three traditional Rs – reduce, reuse, recycle – but on waste avoidance. The EPA has produced an environmental management toolkit for wineries that provides simple steps for minimising resource use and maximising cost savings. For the organic wine industry, this focus on sustainability presents a marketing opportunity and indicates greater demand for organic wines in the future. ■

Contact: Geoff Leighton, WEA president, phone 0412 971 837; Amy Russell, Australian Wine Industry stewardship project, WFA, web: www.wfa.org.au, email: amy@wfa.org.au, phone (08) 8222 9255; Jo Clarke, Victorian EPA, phone (03) 9695 2535; email josephine.clarke@epa.vic.gov.au. The EMS toolkit is available at www.epa.vic.gov.au/Business_sustainability/wineries/.

* This article first appeared in Farming Small Blocks.

In an industry in which a sound vine can take 20 years to hit its straps, long-term planning is of the essence.

Market report

HORTICULTURE

By ALASDAIR SMITHSON

At the time of writing, broccoli is in short supply due to the end of the season, and potatoes and zucchinis have been hard to source because of wet weather in many parts of the country.



A few unfortunate growers, particularly in south-east Queensland, had a lot of their fruit and vegetable crops completely wiped out by recent hail and rain storms.

On the whole, though, the market remains buoyant, with demand still outstrip-

ping supply.

CROP	PRICE \$
Apples	2.50-3.50 per kg
Bananas	28-36 per 13kg carton
Navel oranges	18-32 per 18kg carton
Broccoli	25-40 per 8kg styro
Carrots	27-32.40 per 18kg carton
Headed lettuce	12-19 per dozen
Onions	40-45 per 20kg bag
Potatoes	20-26 per 20kg bag
Tomatoes	35-40 per 10kg box
Zucchini	35-40 per 10kg box

All prices are return-to-grower prices. These prices should be used as a guide only, as local variations will apply depending on supply and demand, seasonal factors, weather and quality.

LIVESTOCK

By CAROLINE LITTLER

Cattle deadweight prices have been stable over the past quarter. Conventional cattle prices are high, thus there is not much of a premium for organic beef.

The organic price is more stable whereas the conventional cattle price varies a lot more. So when it drops, organic producers should start to see bigger premiums.

The export market to the United States is developing, with similar prices to the domestic markets but heavier weight is required. Cattle are being exported to Korea and other South-East Asian countries, indicating there is still demand in this region.

Some producers negotiating with the Asian markets hope for \$4.60 per kilogram. Domestic demand for organic beef is still there, and increasing in some areas. Overall, the domestic market still needs to be developed.

A lot of store lambs are around this spring, especially Damara and Damara-Dorper crosses. While there is still demand, this influx puts the market at risk of flooding. To counter this, export markets for lamb need to be developed.

Another important fact is that organic lamb must be of good quality to achieve a good price. On average, the best prices for lamb come from 17-23kg weights.

BEEF (kg)	QLD	NSW	VIC	SA	WA
Domestic	\$4.50	NA.	\$4.50	\$4.40	\$4
Export	\$4.40	NA	\$4.60	NA	NA
LAMB (kg)	QLD	NSW	VIC	SA	WA
Domestic	NA	NA	\$5.50	NA	NA
Export	NA	NA	\$5.60	NA	NA

Figures are based on deadweight, average return-to-producer prices. Prices are a guide only and vary, depending on region, quality, and supply-demand factors. A more comprehensive report from the Horticulture and Livestock BFA subcommittee groups is available in *Australian Organic Business* (available exclusively to BFA members).