



Sam Statham with father Richard, Rosnay Organic Wines.

Canowindra – an unlikely epicentre of Australian organic wine

» By Jaime Newborn

In Central NSW lies the small township of Canowindra. Described, among other things as a calm region with stable climes, clear blue skies and patchwork hills, visitors are welcomed to the area by a sign announcing the location as the 'Balloon Capital of Australia' (population 2,000).

Amid all these charms however, there is another movement taking shape.

In line with the local Cowra Shire Council's plan to establish the Canowindra and Cowra region as a leader in sustainable and clean living, an above average number of like-minded producers have come together to form an 'organic hub' of agriculture.

Together, they are placing Canowindra on the map as an origin in particular for single-vineyard organic wine brands.

Four ACO-certified organic wine brands have been formed in the area – *Rosnay Organic Wines*, *Wallington Wines*, *Pig in the House* and *Gardners Ground*. Two of these - *Rosnay* and *Gardners Ground* - also belong to a community operation of 12 neighbouring organic properties who add organic olives, lamb, and vegetables to the region's production list.

The Statham family, owners of *Rosnay Organic* have been instrumental in developing the area's organic status. They moved into organic grape production more than ten years ago in 1997, after selling an extensive grazing operation at Barraba in Northern NSW in 1995.

From 1998, they turned their focus to driving organic momentum in the region, establishing an organic co-operative on certified organic land sub-divided under Community Title with the support of Cowra Shire Council.

"When we started going organic we were the first in the region doing it – but we knew after a few years it was the right way for us to go, and a concept we wanted to develop," says Sam Statham (owner, *Rosnay*) who first learnt about organics and biodynamics

working on farms in New Zealand.

"We wanted to be a small part of something big rather than a big part of not much at all. We applied to Cowra Shire Council to develop local property by dividing it through a Community Title. Around that time the Council was concerned over legal actions related to spray drift in another Shire, so they were very supportive of the idea of certified organic blocks."

He says conditions of the development include a covenant that all blocks must be certified organic, with community land accounting for 15% of the total area.

"This is used for access and biodiversity. It includes an area for building which is zoned as an eco-village in the centre of the farm blocks and all houses must be of ecological design and natural material." The area is serviced by both a bore and irrigation licences from the Belubula River.

Sam says though it took four years to establish a strong base of producers on the properties, organic farming picked up pace from 2002. The co-operative is now known as *River Roads Organic Farms*.

Since then, other producers from the region have been attracted to the area's energy and have since become certified organic. Outside River Roads the region now boasts four organic vineyards, and three wineries (*Windowrie* and *Tom's Waterhole*, both within 12km of Canowindra, and *Madrez Wine Services* between Canowindra and Orange).

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Jason and Rebecca O'Dea, owners of Pig in the House wines, with children Louis and Harriette.



district is tipped to lead the charge given the Cowra/ Canowindra region's reputation for consistent weather patterns and good soils.

Why organic wine in Canowindra?

Margaret Wallington (owner *Wallington Wines*) says she decided to try a more natural approach for practical reasons.

"We moved from Sydney to develop a vineyard and olive grove in 1990. Over the years, I felt that what is considered modern vineyard management was not improving the farm – inputs were costing us more with less reliable results.

She says she wants Wallington – which covers 400 hectares, 70 of which are now *in-conversion* for organic grapes, and her own winery (processing operation) – to operate for the long term. "That meant we had to look towards methods like organic, which advocated sustainability and self sufficiency, away from the reliance on external inputs."

She says having people experienced in organic close at hand has been valuable.

"We have people in the area who have been quite pioneering and inspirational in their organic efforts. It is easier for newcomers to try organic if there are a few people doing it in the same area."

Jason O'Dea (owner, *Pig in the House* wines) says the close vicinity also means resources can be shared.

"We can all utilise trailers, and tractors, and Rosnay makes its wine in the Windowrie winery."

He says he decided to try organic both because of its more eco-friendly systems – "sustainability is playing a big part in the region and for its wines" and for personal reasons, after starting a family.

"I'm very happy with the way our wines are progressing.

Because we're in a growing niche market, we have so far avoided some issues of the conventional market, including a heavy over-supply of grapes.

He says feedback from a retail level suggests there is demand for single vineyard wines which accurately reflect their region of origin in their taste.

"Growing organically gives a true reflection of what can be done in this climate and soil – what a cabernet tastes like from this bit of dirt in this bit of the world, and that's important to me."

Herb Gardner, joint owner of *Gardners Ground* with his wife Jenny grows on one of Canowindra's original organic sub-divided plots. Wine producing is his third career.

He says he couldn't be more pleased his neighbourhood has become an 'organic hot-spot'.

But he says as organic production becomes smoother, an emphasis on marketing will be critical for winemakers in years ahead.

"The market is certainly not satisfied yet, but it is tough to break into, and more large companies are looking into organic wines than

before. Awareness of the benefits of organic, single vineyard, local wine needs to be generated."

Sam agrees.

"Canowindra is a bit out of the way and not a tourist destination. While we have a loyal base of regular customers - people who try our wines love them – it is harder for us to get our name out there on a wider level."

The awareness and interest in organic is continuing to grow but must be facilitated, particularly in bottle-shops and distributors.

"It's about educating people on what we do and why, and telling our story."

He says in the meantime, he remains optimistic the Canowindra region will continue to attract organic growers at the same steady rate it has done to date.

"As a group, we're making a positive impact on the town and community – both environmentally and financially – and that's something I'm proud to be a part of," he says.

All four wineries are open to visit by appointment. Cellar door tastings are available at *Rosnay* and *Wallington Wines*.

For more information contact:

- Rosnay Organic Wines: Ph: 1300 767629
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- Wallington Wines: Ph: 02 63447153
W: www.wallingtonwines.com.au
- Gardners Ground: Ph: 02 6344 3135
W: www.gardnersground.com.au
- Pig In The House: Ph: 02 63443506
W: www.piginthehouse.com.au



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