

# Small producers committed to benefiting their region



TONY KEYS

THE KEY FILES



There is a logical thought process which leads to the conclusion that several hundred of Australia's small wineries must close within the next decade. Indeed Dr Tony Jordan, CEO of Yarra Valley-based, French-owned Domaine Chandon, in his capacity as chairman of judges at the 2005 Hobart Wine Show, predicted 50 percent could disappear in the next five years.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Jordan is not alone. Barry Jones is a wine marketing consultant based in Victoria: "I come in contact with numerous small winemakers making and selling wine at a loss and subsidising their hobby through the tax savings it provides against their real source of income. All of this is a perfectly acceptable way to spend your excess earnings if you have a love of the fruit of the vine. However, the 1000 or so small winemakers out there in just this situation are doing major damage to the real small winemakers who actually have to operate at a profit to feed their families. The quicker they give up and get out of the industry the better it will be for those of us who actually earn our living from it," he said.

Is Dr Jordan's prediction inevitable? Is it true that, as Mr Jones asserts, the industry would be better off if hundreds of small wineries disappear? If many of these wineries do close and all the vines are uprooted, will it do anything to alleviate the current over supply of grapes and wine?

Their total crush is so small that it's doubtful if it would make any difference to the over supply. Like Dr Jordan, I have been expecting many to close for several years; perplexingly they continue to increase. What also confounds me is that the more I speak with the proprietors of these small, independent wineries, the more convinced I become that many will survive.

One noticeable highlight of 2005 was the acceptance by various official bodies of the ability of 'regionality' to carry Australian wine further along the road of vinous exports. It is the commitment, passion and sheer determination of Australia's small independent wineries that will convey the industry there.

Over the past three decades, Victoria's Mornington Peninsula has been derided as the home of 'status vineyards'

and 'doing it for the tax breaks'. Undoubtedly there has been an element of status, but those who have 'hung in there' have experienced enough of the downside of grape and wine production to be given the respect that pioneers deserve. As to tax breaks, isn't it the fundamental duty of every law-abiding Australian citizen to try to keep the Treasurer's hand out of their pocket?

I interviewed four Mornington Peninsula vigneron who, on the surface, could be taken for 'Collins Street Farmers'. What I found were four individuals totally committed to the industry, contributing to the enormous investment made by small winery proprietors across Australia, as well as adding to the fabric and environment of the region in so many ways that it is too staggering to calculate. Within most regions there is undoubtedly an element of 'tax break investor' vineyards and wineries run on 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' accounting principles, but there's also plenty of others, like these four – committed contributors bringing benefits to their region and the wider Australian wine industry.

Paradigm Hill Vineyard is the realisation of a vision long held by George and Ruth Mihaly. Visions, however, rarely become reality unless hand in hand with hard work. Dr George William Mihaly, B. Pharm, M.Sc., Ph.D. FAICD is a man of many engrossing facets. After a career in the rarefied area of medical research, George entered the somewhat bumpier life of the commercial world, establishing his own company (Synermedica Pty Ltd) in 1994. In 2000 George merged Synermedica with the global company CRO Kendle International Inc where he continued as managing director until December 2004.

Although George says he is now officially retired (and therefore entitled to claim the title of Paradigm Hill winemaker as his main occupation), still sits on the boards of two drug companies – Prana Biotechnology and Prima Biomed. His 'pet area' is malaria research.

"It's a devastating disease and treated as a poor relation," he said, explaining with feeling and frustration how he had recently returned from a conference in Italy where they were debating the same topics that were being discussed 18 years before."

Many years before the vineyard was established, George and Ruth had decided they would like to own a vineyard and make wine. The Mornington site took some finding.

"We defined what we were looking for and spent about five years viewing different properties. The Mornington Peninsula suited us because it grew the grapes for the style of wine we wanted to make. We found a site covered mainly in blackberry thickets and a sadly neglected 1.5 acres of Pinot Noir vines. We salvaged what we could of the vineyard, cleared the blackberries then designed and planted the rest from scratch.

<sup>1</sup> Sunday Tasmanian, 4 December 2005, author Graeme Phillips.

Neither of us had a background in farming (Ruth was a chef), but this was overcome by getting the right people to advise us such as Nat White at Main Ridge Estate on winemaking and Shane Strange for viticulture,” George said.

Ruth has taken to viticulture, George to winemaking – this will be his fifth solo vintage. He’s proud of the varietal expression being achieved from the four varieties grown – Pinot Noir, Shiraz, Riesling and Pinot Gris.

“It’s the vision we had for the wines; to reflect our terroir,” he said.

Asked if the Shiraz is an anomaly in such a cool region, George explained that it’s possible for two reasons,

“Look at Shiraz in Côte Du Rhône – some of the cooler parts are similar to what we have on the Peninsula, but what you really have to look at is viticulture practice; we prune our Shiraz at the beginning of June. It encourages the vine to go into budburst and ripen earlier. We don’t have to wait until the unpredictable late autumn weather, therefore we get ripe fruit in early April not in May. What we have is a different style of Shiraz. It’s not a ‘three-course meal in a glass’ style, but more elegant. It demonstrates how versatile the variety can be.”

There’s no denying George’s background in science has been of benefit to him in winemaking. “Science is fun,” George said, also pointing out Ruth’s background as a chef has meant both see the importance of marrying food and wine. “It’s an integration of our careers and what we love about food and wine.”

Winemaking allows George to blend the discipline of science to that of creativity and he’s not afraid to experiment. “Every year I have specific questions that I address as we move into each vintage” he said.

Paradigm Hill is not a mere asset for George and Ruth to boast about. Any tax breaks it generates are small compared to the work, passion and capital invested in the property. George looks at the wine as a tangible expression of the family’s work and love. It’s something they can share with others describing the winery as “something beautiful rather than an empire of wealth”. Having said that, he still hopes the vineyard will one day break even. Current estimates are year 11.

#### THE HON KEVIN HARCOURT BELL

Victorian Supreme Court Judge the Hon Kevin Harcourt Bell describes himself (away from the courtroom) as a “specialist Pinot Noir vigneron”.

From a human rights activist in his youth, Kevin followed a fairly traditional legal path – legal aid lawyer, barrister, Queens Council and finally judge. Of the latest he says was “completely unexpected and not in accordance with my life plan”. As in most cases when a barrister becomes a judge, there is a significant drop in income.

“Fortunately the winery and vineyard was capitalised and I had nearly finished the part time wine science and viticulture course [at Charles Sturt University],” Kevin said.

My best skill is undoubtedly the law. I think I am a proved lawyer and an unproved winemaker.”

Kevin and his wife Tricia Byrnes, an accredited family law solicitor, acquired the 20-acre Hurley Farm in 1998, planting nine acres to Pinot Noir over a two year period. As with the others I interviewed for this article, the vineyard plays a pivotal role in family life. Kevin, Tricia, one of their two children, Tricia’s parents, dogs and horses all live on the vineyard.

“I wouldn’t contemplate growing grapes and making wine unless I lived here. It’s a family partnership and most important in that partnership is Tricia. We are both committed to the environment and wine and have been since we met,” Kevin said.

Time management skills were a common thread among those interviewed. Just how can a busy city barrister find time to contemplate establishing a vineyard? Kevin says he has always had mixed feelings about devoting himself utterly and being consumed by a single pursuit.

Almost echoing George Mihaly, Kevin pointed out “the wine industry represents my creative side; terroir bringing together all the elements of the environment, the concept of life force”. He finds both winemaking and vineyard work “meditative”. This in turn is redirected back into the courtroom – bringing a clearer mind to administering justice.

#### DR ALEXANDER BORODIN

Dr Alexander Borodin was a professor of chemistry at the St. Petersburg Academy of Medicine and a noted composer. He is a man much admired by Kevin for his success in both fields, as is George Mihaly of whom he said, “Perhaps he will become the Borodin of winemaking on the Mornington Peninsula”.

Nat White of Main Ridge Estate again appears as giving consultancy support to Hurley Vineyard, as does Phillip Jones of Bass Phillip Wines and Jean-Marie Fourrier of Domaine Fourrier in Gevrey-Chambertin. Kevin believes Pinot Noir is the most “intellectual of varieties” and enjoys the challenge it brings, most importantly in the vineyard.

The production of Hurley Vineyard’s Pinot Noir is Kevin’s way of expressing this *sense of place* and his own feeling and connection to that place. It’s what drives him, his experience of inspired simplicity, his ‘epiphany’. As for the financial angle, yes it has cost a lot, yes it continues to do so but the Bells consider themselves a winemaking family – living and working on their land and they have a lifetime commitment including getting the enterprise into financial order.

#### SHASHI SINGH

If the statistics did exist, it’s likely that the number of Indian female winemakers in the world would be quite small. Shashi Singh gained a Bachelor of Science and a Masters in inorganic chemistry in India. Shortly after leaving university, Shashi married, came to Australia and began work with her husband in his restaurant business.

From science to front of house in a restaurant – surely a story in itself? Shashi chuckles delightfully giving the simple explanation saying “I come from a traditional Indian family. A wife does what she is told to do after she is married”.

Perhaps not so traditional is for the proprietors of Indian restaurants to purchase a vineyard. Which is what Devendra and Shashi Singh did in 1998.

Wildecroft is a 15-acre property with nine acres planted to Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz at Red Hill South.

The move to owning a vineyard was drawn from different inspirations – an interest in wine came from being in the hospitality business. “I was looking for something more to stimulate,” Shashi said. “Scary and challenging” is Shashi’s view of the decision, adding “but I knew I could do it”.

Shashi still works in the restaurant describing it as a “hands on, family run” business and that’s exactly what she wants from the vineyard – a place that’s small enough to be family run with good environmental practices and most of the produce being sold via the restaurant.

The wine is made in Gippsland by Philip Jones of Bass Philip. Shashi spends about a month there during vintage, working and learning from Philip who she considers a mentor, admiring his attention to detail and his work ethic.

Shashi is enrolled at Charles Sturt University, studying viticulture via correspondence, however, she has transferred to a double degree incorporating winemaking.

“I want to be prepared, if ever the time comes. As long as Philip is making my wines I will work in his shadow,” she said.

Asked how she fits in study with working in the restaurant, maintaining a vineyard and the normal pressures of family life including two children, her simple answer is “I get up at four in the morning”. Shashi freely admits a lot of investment has gone into the vineyard and it’s not yet operating at a profit, but it’s getting better – costing a little less each year and earning a little more.

#### PAUL SCORPO

Scientist, judge and restaurateur; these are not city-slicker types looking to make a quick buck via the wine industry. Neither is Paul Scorpo, who describes his route to landscape architect: from a love of growing things to growing plants for other people then starting a nursery. From selling plants to planting them as well. And finally, fed up with planting to other peoples’ designs, taking a Masters in the subject.

The wine side comes from his Italian background.

“My Father made wine each year back in the 1950s in our garage in Coburg and Grandfather had a vineyard in Sicily. I would go up to Nagambie each year with some mates and pick grapes,” he said.

Although he is making wine each year, Paul felt the need for improvement so enrolled in the Northern Metropolitan College of TAFE. Paul names 1993 as the year he got serious about wine but it was to be another three years before he found the right site.

“We went everywhere in Victoria – the Yarra Valley, Bellarine Peninsula, Avoca, Yea... eventually we fell in love with this site on the Mornington Peninsula, bought it in late 1996 and planted in 1997,” he said.

Of the four vigneron interviewed, Paul’s profession (as landscape architect) is the closest to being involved with the land. Assuming he had more understanding and realism

about the perils of owning a vineyard and winery, it begs the question ‘why’?

“It started with wine but it wasn’t a passion, it was an obsession to grow the best grapes and get the best wine you can. Even with simple vineyard tasks there’s a rhythm to them – it’s relaxing. As a landscape architect I rarely get to construct – I design then supervise. The vineyard is family-owned – they all helped set it up and we enjoyed doing it together,” he said.

Paul appeared to be half a step in front of the others interviewed, claiming that last year was the first financial year that Scorpo Wines hadn’t been supported by landscape architecture. “I didn’t inherit a lot of money, it’s not a hobby. I’ve been patient but I have the support of the family,” Paul said.

Scorpo Wines have received many good reviews over the past year but it doesn’t make Paul complacent – calculating it will take at least 15 years to understand the terroir.

“With the vineyard there’s a beauty and simplicity,” he said. That rang a bell: “beauty of the region and the resulting produce,” George Mihaly had said. “It’s about family and environment, it’s about creativity,” said all of them. To talk and listen to these people is a humbling experience – we need them, Australia needs them; let’s all listen a little harder.

*Tony Keys writes for The Key Report: the thinking person’s weekly update and analysis of the wine industry. Further information: [www.thekeyreport.com.au](http://www.thekeyreport.com.au)*



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