

Striving for higher ground

I got fired from the family business when I was ten. I am still not forgiven for it today. Every now and then out comes the story of my sacking, usually over a family BBQ or the Christmas dinner table.

The tale is a simple one. I was standing in the bottom of a trench, bored out of my mind. Bored in the way that only a ten year old boy can be in a confined space.

My family are builders, so I was standing head high in a drainage pit my Dad was digging out with a large mechanical Backhoe. I was just blissfully looking at the way the soil and the rocks made little patterns... la la la... Not a care in the world.

So, I decided to hammer open some shiny little rocks. Not having the correct tools for the job I used my Dad's spirit level.

'Smash' it went, broken into three pieces. Yellow spirit leaking all over my hands.

My Dad heard the commotion and stopped the digging machine. I tried to excuse myself by offering to have the price of the level taken out of my pay. I was promptly marched off the building site never to return. The level cost about \$80- in 1980's prices...

Fast forward to 2006 and I find myself having a flashback. I find myself standing in a trench of McLaren Vale soil, this time

in a vineyard. A soil pit dug in a very good vineyard.

I see at best 90cm of red earth over almost pure white chalky limestone. The limestone fizzes as acid is dripped into it. I am told this standard soil testing practice. The gas is hydrogen given off as the acid solution meets the basic limestone rock. I am told it is not standard practice to smash rock with a spirit level.

I am with a study group listening to the owner of the land talk about the soil and the vines. Don Oliver- the viticulturalist patriarch of the Oliver family.

Don is one of the chain of Oliver's who kept farming the high ground north of the McLaren Vale township since European settlement. Each generation was good at not getting fired by the previous. Don is the fifth generation to farm after William and Elizabeth Oliver traveled to South Australia from Scotland and settled in 1841 on the site where we are digging pits.

"I must admit, when I dented Don's new Hilux last year... I did think my days were numbered!"

I spy the sixth generation standing off to the side- Corrina Rayment- the family winemaker since convincing her Grandfather & Uncles to let her have some fruit from the Oliver's Taranga vineyard. I ask her the obvious question- how do you not get fired?

"I made sure that it is written into the wills!" Corrina fires back at me and laughs. *"I must admit, when I dented Don's new Hilux last year... I did think my days were numbered!"*

But really, I think the key is communication & each of us bringing something different to the business. My Uncle cant make wine and I can...which offered a value addition to our previously grape growing only business. Fellow 6th generationer, Brioni has just finished wine marketing- so she adds something different again to the business."

Family businesses have a different sort of dynamic, you have yourself Don and Brioni how does it work day to day?

"We are constantly succession planning, and trying to get the business to a point where more family members can come on board in



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the future and contribute in their own way. I am lucky, we do get on pretty well and respect each others talents- plus we all have a burning passion for this vineyard, it all helps. I especially love working with Brioni to bring Oliver's Taranga into the future.

“We want to stay around for another six generations, but are conscious of how tough that is.”

We are a family business and we want to remain so.”

Corrina was, or should I say is, something of a wunderkind. You can tell in the first few minutes of meeting her, she has a very sharp mind and a boundlessly enthusiastic personality. It didn't surprise me to hear as a student at Adelaide University she won a scholarship with Southcorp Wines. She spent a year studying in at UC Davis in California before returning to work in four different regions for Southcorp on their Winemaking Graduate Program.

I ask how does having the expectations of a large company- and fulfilling a sponsored education program- compared to that of a family business?

“The large company was brilliant, but in such a different way to coming home...”

From the Corp I was able to learn about loads of different regions, wine styles, brands, ends of the business. I got to

gain skills in managing people, blending, tasting, etc.

Was it all a bit sterile working like digging the earth from the cab on an air-conditioned excavator versus shovelling everything by hand?

No, I mean, the old Corp had some brilliant, old-school, historic brands and I got to be a part of their story. It is a different company now- but I only look back on my time Southcorp as an excellent experience.

However, no matter how much you do with a big company, you never really own it fully... the passion is there, but it isn't the same as working for family.

In a small company there is so much more to think about. Am I making the right wine styles? Do I spend enough time in the market? Do I know enough about marketing?

Will Don get over the dent in his Hilux? Wine price? Wine Shows? Varieties? Plantings? Watering regimes? The colour of the walls in the toilet in our new cellar door development? Am I doing enough to support the region? Etc etc etc...

It all keeps me awake at night- and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Now, everything I do has a direct impact on the bottom line and where we want to take our little brand.”

Corrina clearly thinks a lot about her part in the dynasty. She admits she is in awe of the six generations. I am in awe too. For all of my joking around, I take history and sense of place seriously. It is hard not to imagine someone standing in the same place I am 170 years ago. Then too the soil was important. You can't help not imagine a slight couple from Scotland weaving up a dirt track, with a horse and cart towing a scraped together collection farming tools. The Husband turns to his Wife and says, we will farm here. This is good ground.

It sounds a bit harsh but I have to raise a point. There is a draw back to the whole six generations story. The Australian wine industry is full of folks who find some way to link back heritage to winemakers of old. The industry is full of those who dig up dead great aunties who owned land that is now a vineyard and talk about their history. In many cases it is genuine, others a bit tenuous. Sometimes these generational stories sound a little too good to be true.

It can be just a marketing tool to sell wine.

“In our family the first generation made wine, judged at the 1857 Willunga Wine Show, exhibited & won nothing. Then it seems the next



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two generations lads were a bit too heavy with their wine, so the women took over, stopped all of the winemaking, made the boys sober up, and sold the grapes off to wineries like Kay Bro's & d'Arry's. They pretty much ran the joint until my great grandfather -R.W. Oliver- got everything back on track. But by then, no-one knew how to make wine, so wasn't until I came along that that all changed again!

“...the next two generations lads were a bit too heavy with their wine...”

I have done tastings where people come and say 'surely you don't actually make the wine'.

Well I do.”

Corrina does have a natural advantage; by luck or good design her predecessors picked an almost ideal site for growing grapes. The vineyard sits half way up the same hill side that sits d'Arenberg and not a million miles away from some of the other great McLaren Vale names like Kay Bro's Amery.

It is no accident that I am here to look at the soil. You don't go to the trouble of studying the something unless it is worth celebrating.

“Soil is almost everything in my books...and that is what I am all about at Oliver's Taranga. The soils across our property are wide and varied, and the



always be learning and playing by trialling new things, I will always be close to the core of the vineyard.”

Corrina tells me she has several new wines in the pipeline. All from small little patches of experimental vines. Very different from her time before she returned home.



What lies beneath?

As a rough rule the thinner the soil under a vineyard the better suited it is to growing red wine grapes. This limits vine growth and the vines put energy into their berries instead of growing leaves and shoots.

vines on each of them are different ages and varieties. My aim is to let each one of them speak in the bottle. This is what our brand is about. There is no point us being proud of being six generations on the same property without aiming to express this amazing dirt in the wines.

Having said that, it is my interpretation of the expression of the soils.

When you grow up on & around a place, there is a lot that you learn from osmosis! So, I am confident that, while I will

“When I was corporate winemaking & making Lindemans Bin 65 Chardonnay (an 18 million Litre blend), that was art. That was all about creating the expression that you wanted by using as much winemaking magic as you had available to you.

At Oliver's, I have the magic given to me in the form of some amazing fruit, so I just need to use my skills to turn that into the wine I think that particular patch should represent, a wine that I know I would drink, and importantly one that the past and future generations would be proud of.”

Pink Marketing...

with sjh

What is with all this pink marketing to women wine consumers? Pink labels, cute little animals, low calorie 'lite' wines, and books that compare wines to fashion.

Are there really 'chick wines?' Do women really prefer white wines and lighter style reds? Who are the wine collectors in the family? Who chase high points scoring wines? Do women avoid high alcohol wines more than men?

The director of US marketing think tank Full Glass Research, Christian Miller published the results of recent research. Core wine drinkers - those who drink wine once a week or more often- are 46% male, 54% female. Millers research indicates little basis for the popular belief that women prefer white wines and cute labels.

Wine marketers have certainly been conducting some market research and have realized the fact that women have a huge influence in the purchasing decisions of wine. They have seen that female approval for the drinks consumed by men can be a driving factor in a brand's success. In the last ten years there has been some significant shifts in volume and major changes in consumer profiles of wine drinkers, largely caused by social change.

'The female purchaser responds to emotion and what is likeable. Hence 'pink' marketing tactics used to encourage attention and associating the wine brand to be 'attractive to females'. Females enjoy purchasing and the shopping experience as a whole and have a mindset that needs visual stimulation to satisfy. Females are tempted by the 'stylish' and what is stylish and well presented will get noticed by the female buyer and increase its probability of being purchased.

One of the huge successes has been the establishment of 'Banrock Station' by the Hardy Wine Company. While not strictly designed to appeal to women its earth friendly marketing is a good example.

As for the assumption that females prefer white wine and lower alcohol wines there is not much research saying that is true or not.

Personally I drink equal amounts of red or white varieties and the purchase decision/consumption choice again comes down to likeability and emotion. What you feel like at the time, what is stylish and attractive and what is acceptable for the consumption situation. Image is everything...



You've got to get real hot to play real cool... Pirra is the new range of low alcohol wines from Pirramimma.

She's in fashion... Wine Chick is a brand of T-Shirts from Swarovski in the US.

