



A time of fire and ice

The massive pile of bamboo that we had knocked down before it took over the place, exploded with the crack of a thousand stockwhips. Angry tongues of fire were thrust six and seven metres into the air, to become mini fireballs that fled into the darkening sky. We stood in the moist, cold air of dusk and watched the conflagration. It was at once magnificent and terrifying. And we had started it ourselves.

This is the time of fire and ice. Frosty mornings when ice crystals cover the vineyard like a blanket of snow, give way to smoke-hazed evenings. Here, there and everywhere around us, prudent property owners are burning their unused paddocks and scrublands to reduce fuel load before the dry lightning storms of summer do the job in a less-orderly manner.

Of course, I was unaware of all this burning until one evening I saw flames licking the length of our south-western boundary. "Brad, Brad, there's a fire up the back!" I yelled. He came quickly, peered at the inferno, then patted me gently on the shoulder and laughed. "It's a controlled burn," he said. "Look, there's the fire truck." Squinting through the smoke haze I could indeed make out a ghostly shape and some figures moving like grey shadows through the fields that adjoin the vineyard.

Our turn to burn came a couple of weeks later when Brad was having trouble preparing the two acres we intend planting with new vines in early November. The love grass, (no idea where the name comes from), is so tough that the only way of breaking up the large clumps is to burn them. We applied for a fire permit and Brad burned off the paddock in small patches, careful not to let it get away.



Ice has been a regular visitor since our first big frost in early June. One morning it was -9°C . Great crusts of ice covered the shallow parts of the lake. A fist-sized piece of quartz left lying on an outdoor table had a thick covering of icy ‘hairs’. The vines don’t mind the ice. They are sleeping.

We felt like real wine producers, not just owners of big tanks of fermenting grape juice, when Mike Hayes, the winemaker, gave us a progress tasting of Savina Lane’s first vintage. However we were taken aback when he said, “There are two ways of going about this, Brad. I’m going to have to lock you up, or I’m going to lock up the wine.” We laughed but Mike had a point. Despite Brad’s desire for some positive cash flow, our two whites are young and need time to mature in the bottle. So now the long wait begins. The whites won’t be ready for at least 12 months. Even when they are, we’ll have only 40 cases of Fiano and 100 of Viognier. By the time we’ve sent samples off to James Halliday, kept some for competitions, put some aside as Savina Lane museum wines and no doubt given a few away, there won’t be a lot of cash that ends up in our bank account. People have been telling us for some time now that owning a vineyard is like standing in a strong wind and throwing away \$100 notes.

Except for the Tempranillo, which is currently in barrels, the other reds - the Graciano and the two Shiraz varieties, are still in secondary fermentation (known as malolactic fermentation or ‘malo’). Soon they will go into barrels for about a year, then rest for perhaps another year or two in a bottle before Brad (if he isn’t locked up), makes the decision to release them.





A lot has happened since our last missive. Autumn has come and gone. Red and gold leaves turned to brown and flew away in the blustery winds that have come sweeping across this small granite plain.

The Scissorhands, alias the team of professional pruners with their sharp compressed-air-driven secateurs, have also been and gone. The whole vineyard was pruned in less than three days by four of them. The sound of *ka-choo, ka-choo* echoed off the hills that form a rocky backdrop to the vineyard. During a rare rest break they demolished a tray of Brad's banana muffins and told us a story about a pruner who went to brush a fly away from his face, but cut off his ear instead.

This year Brad decided to 'pull' the canes himself. When the vines are pruned, the long canes don't fall to the ground, they are caught in the wires and need to be removed by hand. Pulling them out oneself saves money but is a tough job. Our friend Ian Webb and his family were with us and Ian got stuck in. We put the girls to work dressing the cuts to the vine cordons with tree wound paint. If 9-year-old Alyssa doesn't grow up to be a famous poet, she can have a job in my vineyard anytime, 'her' vines were so well-dressed.

We are now in the throes of the clean-up. The rows of vines are littered with canes that can't be left to rot as they are a source of fungus spores. They have to be raked up, first with the tractor, then by hand, into large piles. Some time soon, four huge bonfires of vine prunings will light the sky over Savina Lane. Bring your marshmallows if you're in the vicinity.

We've also cleaned up Back Creek where it runs through our place. We have a licence to pump a quantity of water out each day, but as there is nothing in the creek, it isn't much use. The creek was overgrown and choked with long grass and we hired an excavator to dig it out, reshape it a bit and prepare a site for a future pump. Brad and I then spent a morning sowing and raking in rye grass seed to prevent erosion of the banks. The light rain we've had these last few days should give it a gentle kick along.



The wildlife here has been keeping us amused. Especially the mother kangaroo and her joey that seem to have made Savina Lane their permanent home. We often see them sitting at the end of a row of vines at sunset appearing to watch the sun go down. Some time soon we may see the black swans, which apparently stop over for a short time in late winter or early spring each year.

So we approach the end of our first six months at Savina Lane full of plans and a surprising amount of energy to carry them out. Design work is well under way for a new winery complex that includes an underground cellar.

I can't help laughing when I think of Brad's promise that all I had to do here, that is, my *only* contribution to this idea of being a wine producer, was to collect the gold medals at wine shows. My blisters, aching shoulders and tree-dressing-paint-spattered Mongrel work boots are telling a different story.

Thanks for being interested in Savina Lane. Come and see us anytime. But be careful we don't give you a job to do. There is always one available.

And one more thing...if you have a friend or two whom you think would like to receive our stories about life in a vineyard, please forward this to them and ask them to send us their email address. We'll contact them personally.

Email us at: savinalane@bigpond.com or phone (07) 4683 5377

Cheers from your friends

Brad and Cheryl

PS. You're too late for the vine pruning bonfires. We torched them last night. Some friends and a guitar were visiting and we sat on the ground in front of the biggest fire, sang songs and drank wine. No marshmallows were sacrificed.

