



VINE Life

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Now you see it...now you don't



It loomed, black and menacing above the vineyard. A giant shoebox - perhaps an escapee from Dr Who's props department, dropped by accident into a hole in the granite shelf that sloped down towards the vines.

Once upon a time there was a little hillock there, rising a few metres on a steepish angle at the front and tucking itself into the slope behind, where the land rises to meet the ranges to the south.

It has been a year since powder monkey Gordon Leahy blew the hillock to smithereens. A full twelve months have passed since earth sculptor Mark McNichol arrived to haul out massive razor-edged granite blocks weighing up to six tonnes, blasted from the earth.

For several weeks, a huge concrete box without a lid replaced the granite boulders. It looked exactly like a 25-metre above-ground swimming pool. At least it did until it had been sealed against water penetration by sticky, gooey black tar, whereupon it took on the appearance of a huge black shoebox.

The earth sculptor reappeared a few weeks ago with his biggest boys' toys to re-assemble the hillock around the black box. The task of creating a solid base on top of which another concrete slab could be placed without risk of subsidence, was not a job for a lesser mortal.

Recycling all the material pulled from the hole, Mark gradually built up a platform from gigantic granite slabs, then added several hundred truck-loads of decomposed granite fill. Soon we'll cover this with top-soil and the hillock will be clothed in grass again across its northern face.

Finding more than two hundred truck-loads of fill meant the sacrifice of land in our south-western corner. The cost of bringing material into our property would have been horrendous. As it was the truck ran like a rabbit back and forth for days, taking 'deco' (decomposed granite fill) from our own little quarry to the building site. Mark dug and Brad drove the tip-truck. The latter is so quick at driving and placing the loads in the right spot that Mark says he's going to call on him next time he's short of a driver.

continued page 2



Cheryl picking Tempranillo for testing to see if it is ready to harvest

Slicker picker

I've done it. I said I'd never do it. I said I could never do it. But now I've done it. Spent five hard hours picking grapes alongside a local team of gun pickers.

"The Fiano has to come off," decreed winemaker Mike Hayes, after he'd finished testing our sample in the winery lab. That meant all hands on deck, full steam ahead, let nothing get in your way, etc etc. We raced home, phoned the picking team we'd had on stand-by for a week and started washing picking buckets and pulling out the big 780L fruit bins that had been gathering dust since last vintage. We use these to take the grapes to the winery. They hold about 400kg of grapes.

Then I drove the tractor while Brad pulled in the kilometre and a half of bird netting, stuffing it into special bags inserted into his net-remover invention. It was a team effort and we were pretty happy with ourselves by early on harvest day. We were ready. Brad

had even cooked banana muffins for the pickers.

Perhaps it was the temptation of earning the right to one of Brad's muffins, or perhaps just the fact that we had under-estimated the quantity of fruit on the Fiano, but four pickers just weren't enough. I grabbed secateurs and started snipping and Brad picked what he could between filling the huge bins on the back of the tractor with buckets of picked fruit and ensuring plenty of empty buckets were available for the fast and furious pickers.

Five hours on your feet in hot sunshine isn't easy, but with only a couple of short water stops and a break for 'smoko' with coffee and muffins, I managed to pick my share and still had enough energy to work out wage packets afterwards.

The Tempranillo is the next block to go. It looks like a big crop. Think I might hire *eight* pickers this time and stick to washing up cups after smoko.

continued from page 1

This little corner of Savina Lane looks like a moon-
scape now, but we'll cover with topsoil and rehabilitate with native trees when we're done.

So, now the big black shoebox is gone forever. Buried beneath gentle ramparts on three sides and joined, once again, to the southern slope. Soon, there'll be a lid on the box, which will form part of the slab for our new winery shed and cellar door. And, several metres below, there will be a snug and secret bunker where our wines can sleep in (we hope) perfect conditions until we're ready to wake them up.



About to spray the underground wine cellar with bitumen



Brad in Didier's cellar near Ampuis in the Condrieu-Côte Rôtie wine region. The similarity to our new cellar is extraordinary.

A Tale of Two Tastings

On a sunny morning last year in France, three friends set out to do some wine-tastings around the vineyards of the northern Rhône Valley.

The route from Saint Etienne to Ampuis, the main town in the region, was tortuous (and unnecessarily long) because one dear friend hated maps and sort of 'knew' the way. By the time they arrived it was late morning and a flock of sheep could have been herded safely down the main street without endangering their lives.

No prizes for guessing who these wine-loving friends were. (Quite a few Vine Life readers met Jean-Paul on his visit here in 2010). Brad and I were gritting our teeth as JP swung recklessly around some of the hairpin bends on the steep descent from the Massif Central.

We were surprised at the lack of bustle in Ampuis, but Jean-Paul was encouraged to bang loudly on the door of one winery by a small sign that said 'Open 9am-12.30pm'. Our watches read 11.30am. After a couple of minutes a scowling woman opened the huge creaky door and beckoned us into a damp and stuffy room that was piled up with boxes of wine.

Jean-Paul politely requested a wine tasting and Madame, with an expression so pained it was as if we were pulling her toenails out, reluctantly poured two tiny portions. (Brad and I had to share). We tasted and then began to ask a few questions about the wine. But Madame cut us off curtly, saying she hadn't time to answer as she was closing soon.

Jean-Paul retorted that it was only 11.45am and her

**Couldn't fit this story in our last issue.
Thought you might
enjoy it this time around.**

sign said the cellar door was open until 12.30pm. She didn't blink, but batted straight back with the comment that well, of course, she had to shut before that. She had to cook lunch!

Jean-Paul flared like a bonfire of vine canes. Grabbing our arms he marched us out of the cellar door, angrily firing a verbal volley over his shoulder: "If you can't find the time to answer our queries, Madame, we can't find the time to buy your wine!"

The problem was, I really wanted to buy some Côte Rôtie which is made from syrah grapes, known to us as shiraz. We had promised to bring back a couple of bottles to present at one of our winegrowers' dinners here in Stanthorpe. To make things ten times worse, there did not seem to be a restaurant open anywhere. A hungry Brad is not a happy or pleasant companion.

We walked uptown and downtown, eyes scanning the horizon hopefully for that magic 'restaurant' sign, but to no avail. Then we came upon a small *tabac* that was still open. "Wait here" commanded Jean-Paul and pushed open the door. We waited. The minutes ticked by before he emerged smiling. "Just met one of the local vigneron" he said. "He's invited us to taste his wines."

"Great, where is his cellar?" we said.

"Oh," said JP, "I didn't ask".

continued page 4

continued from page 3

Back he went into the *tabac*. We waited.

Quite a long time passed before Jean-Paul came out again. "The winery is just a couple of kilometres down the road. I know how to find it," he said, looking very pleased with himself.

"Good, what time are we going there?" asked Brad.

"Oh," said JP, "I didn't ask".

Back he went into the *tabac*.

Several more minutes went by, before JP emerged, accompanied by a smiling, bronzed fellow crowned by a halo of frizzy grey hair. He was tiny and tightly packed with muscle from, we assumed, lugging everything up and down the steep hillsides of his vineyard. He wore a red singlet and a pair of khaki shorts that had seen many years of use. But he was a local. And he was being friendly.

"I am Didier" he said, gripping the hand of each of us in turn and squeezing strongly. He assured us that he would be delighted to show us his cellar and give us tastings of his wines. We couldn't wait to pay him a visit. *Mais non!* Not for two hours, he said. He needed to have his lunch. That left us with nothing to do and nowhere to eat during that time.

Our strange new friend came to our rescue, pointing out that the (rather scruffy-looking) bar across the road had good food and served the local Côte Rôtie. We wandered into the bar and discovered a jolly little cafe attached at the back where an attractive waitress recommended a carafe of the house wine. We liked it a lot and asked the name of the producer. Lo and behold, it was made by our new friend Didier. But of course. She was his wife.

We stretched lunch out to two hours and then tracked Didier down. His winery was well-hidden beneath a sign that advertised fruit, vegetables and cider and was the most untidy place I have ever seen, but he welcomed us warmly and we spent three hours tasting every wine in his very many barrels.

Strangely, he had an underground wine storage cellar accessed by a hoist. Just like we will have. Some of his wines were excellent and we bought some Côte Rôtie to bring home. JP bought several dozen including Didier's AOC Condrieu viognier, which we found too heavily-wooded for our taste as well as extremely expensive.

Just as we were leaving, Didier rushed back into the winery and returned with a long, stainless-steel pole which the French winemakers use for stirring the lees. "*Un petit cadeau*" he said, giving the heavy item to Brad. "From one winemaker to another."

Brad didn't tell him that, firstly, he wasn't a winemaker, (although in France, the landowner is considered the winemaker), and secondly, lugging home a long, heavy steel pole with a strange shape at one end, was not something he relished doing. However, despite wanting to 'lose' the *bâtonnager* on the TGV to Paris, he did bring it all the way home and presented it to our winemaker, Mike Hayes, as a Christmas present.

**"A bottle of wine contains more philosophy
than all the books in the world."**

Louis Pasteur



Jean-Paul at lunch, looking typically French



Brad & new best friend, Didier of Ampuis



Friend Jean-Luc lugging grapes at Condrieu



Pickers scramble up steep slopes at Condrieu



Savina Lane wines were in the line-up

A class of his own

The four Masterclasses presented by winemaker Mike Hayes at the Apple & Grape Festival here in Stanthorpe at the beginning of March were booked out. There were two sessions on mainstream varieties and two on alternative wines.

We had put our hands up to be stewards. Like almost everyone in the wine business here, most people were busy meeting the demands of up to 60,000 festival-goers over the three days and had no hands to spare.

The wineries all set up kiosks in the main park, offering free wine tastings and selling wine by the glass or bottle. People came from everywhere with their chairs and tables and set up under the trees. Music and entertainment were non-stop. Gourmet food from virtually every cuisine on the planet demanded over-indulgence. (That black truffle duck paté!)

Stanthorpe was bedecked from head to toe with lights and pennants. Bands performed everything from hard Rock to Celtic to Country & Western, one after the other, on stages set up in the park and along the main street, playing all day and well into the night on the Saturday and in the park on Sunday.

Mental As Anything gave a concert beside Quart Pot Creek and Elvis made an appearance on Sunday. (At least it *looked* and *sounded* like Elvis). Fireworks, belly dancers, a huge street parade, fire-eaters, a laser light show and stalls selling everything the human brain can contrive made it an unforgettable couple of days.

When Mike asked if he could include our Fiano and Graciano in the line-up for his Alternative Wines Masterclasses, we happily obliged, even though the Graciano, only just bottled, still had no label. We had some over-runs of the Viognier label so I blacked out that name and wrote 'Graciano (not yet released)' across the label front. It looked OK. Some people might have even thought it quite *avant garde*. The new red wine labels are still in the design stage.

There were eight alternative varieties showcased - four whites and four reds. We were in illustrious company with Symphony Hill's Gerwurztraminer - a Melbourne Wine Show trophy winner - Golden Grove's Vermentino and Malbec (fabulous), a gorgeous Tempranillo from Hidden Creek and a lovely Mourvedre from Pyramids Road as well as the famous Verdelho from Robert Channon Wines. This latter wine is internationally-known and was served to Queen Elizabeth on her last visit to Brisbane.

When one considers how many alternative varieties are grown here, it was gratifying to have *two* of our wines selected for presentation. While the participants were impressed by all the alternative varieties, it was the Graciano that created the most interest. One person pleaded with us to sell them a bottle on the spot. Quite a few people wanted to go on our mailing list.

The next Apple & Grape Festival will be in March, 2016 and will be huge as they are celebrating their 100 years anniversary, so put that in your diary and make sure you are here.



Some of our 2014 Viognier being barrel-fermented in French Oak.

Condrieu on the Granite Belt

Now before I get sued for using a French AOC description, let me hasten to explain. We're experimenting.

Following our visit to Condrieu last year and after a lot of lovely tasting sessions with young vigneronns who are making big changes in the way they do things. we have decided to add just a touch of French Oak to our 2014 vintage Viognier to see whether we (and you) like it or not.

We felt quite sorry for the young vigneronns we met. They are so restricted by the French *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* rules which govern everything about their grape production and winemaking. However, a few we met are pushing the boundaries as far as they can. They all envied our freedom to decide how, what and where we can grow grapes and produce wine.

In Condrieu all viognier is oaked. Indeed, a lot of it is over-oaked. We found several undrinkable, as did our French friend Jean-Paul. But a good Condrieu is magnificent and although the altitude where it is grown is quite different from ours - altitude 250 metres instead of our 800 metres, the soils are the same, decomposed granites, and the climate is not dissimilar. So we'll see. *Keep you posted.*

2012 FIANO **SOLD OUT**

We now only have our museum stock of Fiano left which we will put away in the new cellar and pull out a bottle every now and then to see how it is aging.

2012 VIOGNIER - ONLY 20 CASES REMAIN

We now have 20 out of our original 96 cases left and that's all until the end of the year when we might release our 2012 reds and 2013 whites at the Good Food & Wine Show in Brisbane.

The 2012 Viognier is drinking beautifully right now.

Email us if you would like some before it's too late.

WHERE'S MY CHEF?

Brad is getting out of hand. While he is totally thriving on having so many challenges and problems to solve, all coming at him at a hundred miles an hour at the same time, I am having a great deal of trouble dealing with my whirling dervish. For one thing, his cooking has suffered.

No longer can I rely on his preparing gourmet dinners every night for me after he has worked all day driving tip-trucks, helping the concretors or managing the vineyard.

No longer does he have time to wander the food stores thinking about wonderful things to prepare for me. I have to actually buy our morning tea these days where once there were home-made shortbreads or muffins in the tin. He doesn't even have time to do the shopping!

When he only had the vineyard to worry about he would start the day by asking me what I would like for dinner. To my lasting regret, I took these halcyon days for granted and would often just wave a casual hand and say, 'surprise me!' and he always did. Now it's another story.

Don't get me wrong, I don't mind doing dinner. I've been told I'm quite good at scrambled eggs on toast.

*Cheers
Leahy*



SAVINA
Lane

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