



VINE LIFE APRIL-MAY 2012



Autumn colours the Tempranillo

A cellar door...it's for the birds

We released four of them this morning. Yesterday it was three. Most growers send in their dogs to deal out a swift execution, but we rise with the sun to go on bird patrol. Despite the electronic bird scarers that send out shrieks and screeches and the sound of gunshots, it's a rare morning to find no flapping, frantic birds entangled in the netting that veils our rows of vines.

For the berry-eaters such as currawongs, rosellas and lorikeets, the temptation of luscious, ripe grapes is irresistible. Great squadrons arrive at dawn and late afternoon. Most eat what they can through the protective nets, but a foolish few each day become caught. Sometimes we find them too late. They die from fear or exhaustion in the struggle to escape. Or we find evidence of death...usually just a bunch of feathers and a huge hole in the net, courtesy of a predator. One morning I found a bird's leg hanging from one of the nets, the claw totally entangled. There was not a feather in sight, the usual indication of an attack, so did this poor creature tear its own leg off? Surely that's impossible. Among the avian thieves released yesterday was one youngster whose pitiful squeaks drew us quickly. Brad shouted as he fled into the skies "@#!...and stay out!" But he'll probably be back tomorrow. Until we finish harvesting, the birds won't stop trying. As we ambled back to a warm kitchen through the mist, Brad grumbled, "it's crazy, we won't have any wine to sell for at least a couple of years but the birds think our cellar door is already open!"



Bird damage in the Graciano



Right now we are fighting the birds on two fronts. In the vineyard, the block of late-maturing *graciano*, is being blitzed. Out front, the paddock just sown with oat seeds as part of preparation for a new planting of *petit manseng* and *montepulciano* vines next spring, is being stripped by battalions of galahs and grass parrots. We can do little. No amount of shouting, stick-waving, rock-throwing or running about in frustration fazes them. They are canny and flutter just a few metres further down the block and settle again. Of course we aren't the only vineyard with bird problems. The Granite Belt vineyards all wear nets once veraison (when the grapes begin to ripen) has occurred. There are wraps and drapes and tent-like structures, but no method seems to work perfectly. Brad is determined to invent something that will protect both our fruit and the birds next season.

French vigneronns don't have a bird problem. Each October during hunting season, farmers shoot anything that moves. French shooters came to mind when we heard of a young deer being caught in bird netting in a nearby vineyard. His antlers became so entangled and his reaction so frenzied that release was impossible, so he was shot. We were surprised to hear there are thousands of deer in the wild forests of the Granite Belt. We heard one local shoots as many as 600 each year. Bizarrely, days before, Brad had mentioned his liking for venison to Greg, leader of what is known around here as the A-Team. These are a band of expert vine workers recommended to us by our winemaker and consultant, Mike Hayes. We have engaged them for the harvest, as well as some grafting and pruning. We were sitting around the table with friends the day after the buck was shot, when Greg arrived, a massive haunch of venison under his arm. Brad marinated it in red wine and herbs and slow-roasted it for four hours. We ate our fill for days and then made venison pie from the still copious leftovers.





Mike Hayes our winemaker and Cheryl with our first crush

Except for the noble *graciano*, our harvest this year is over. The *viognier* was first, then the *fiano*, known to the ancient Romans as *apianum*, followed, smelling and tasting of honey. A week or two later, the gorgeous, purple *tempranillo* and the two blocks of *shiraz* were ready for harvest within days of each other, causing a mild panic here due to the need to lift all the nets for the pickers. Fortunately good friends were visiting and we put them to work.

Yields are low this year on the Granite Belt, but everyone is happy with the quality. Mike tells us it will be an exceptional vintage. He is ecstatic about the wine that is developing from our block of old-vine *shiraz*. 'Smell that' he said, last time we were at the winery. We stuck our heads in the vat of dark, rich juice and breathed in the perfume of ripe raspberries. He is almost as excited about the *tempranillo*. 'Look at that colour' he says, and 'listen to this' as he holds the glass of the fermenting juice to his ear. Unbelievers, we do the same, to be amazed at the gentle popping of wild yeasts. Our wine is being made by Mike at Symphony Hill's winery as ours still has to be designed and built. His major client, Symphony Hill has won so many gold medals the boasting wall at their cellar door is overcrowded. The accolades are all due to Mike's expertise. We hope some of the magic will rub off on us.

Buying a vineyard with a crop almost ready for harvest has given meaning to all the clichés, like 'in the deep end' and 'steep learning curve'. Now, as harvest draws to an end, there has been time to wander for pleasure and to sit and watch the sunset, *apero* in hand. After the rain, our lake is brimming. It might have started life as a man-made dam, but the vast reed-ringed basin has integrated into the natural environment here – it is filled with ducks, water insects, frogs, fish and long-necked turtles. We met three old girls yesterday, waddling their way back to water after a short excursion along our driveway to lay their eggs at the edge of the newly-sown paddock. One very wrinkled lady had dug a lovely deep hole but no amount of straining resulted in a deposit of eggs. We left her well alone in her travail, but a later look revealed an empty hole. Perhaps she, like me, is past her egg-laying days.



The lake is full of water and wildlife



We have had many nods of approval of our choice of the new name *Savina Lane*, for the vineyard. (It was previously called 'Backpocket'). The locals seem to like the idea that we are acknowledging the Italian family who moved here in the Fifties and planted the first block of shiraz. Old Signora Savina still lives in the area, but husband Rosario now drinks his wine with the gods. The idea of the vineyard's history did influence us, but as we actually live in Savina Lane, we thought the name would also help locate us.

Autumn is upon us and this is a beautiful place to watch its progress. The leaves of the *tempranillo* are russet as are those of the plum and pear trees, survivors of a former orchard. It is early days, but I have to acknowledge that I am being slowly drawn in by the loveliness of this little vineyard snuggled at the feet of granite-marbled mountains. A stroll along the vine rows can turn into a reasonable walk - there are almost seven kilometres of them. Brad bounds out of bed at dawn and a smile rarely leaves his face. He works himself to a standstill by evening, but he is happily exhausted. Even with harvest over, there is still a lot to do but so far our enthusiasm shows no sign of waning. Vine life seems to suit us both.

Postscript: Sunday April 22nd Two tonnes of *graciano* were harvested this morning and we have just seen thousands of tiny green oat shoots emerging in the front paddock. So the birds didn't get it all after all!

Post-postscript Tuesday May 1st The grapes are picked, the birds have flown, the nets are in - all seven kilometres of them. Now to the other 999 jobs we have waiting. Thanks to friends Peter & Marilyn McIntosh and Annie & Phil Kirkwood, who slaved their entire weekend with us to help bring in the first kilometre of nets. Their input helped Brad devise a system of rapid retrieval where the only one to get up a sweat is himself. I merely drive the ute up and down the rows while he stands in the back and heaves in the nets from the vine top (much like a Sydney-Hobart race crew) straight into a purpose-made bag. Thanks also to dear friends Ruth & Nick Murray who lifted veils for two days as the pickers followed hard on their heels. There is always something to do here, so all volunteers are welcome.

Have just harvested the saffron from my first crocus flowers, enough for a tajine! When you have a minute Brad...

Cheers to all from us both

