



VINE *Life*

NUMBER 7/DECEMBER 2013



To all the Friends of Savina Lane who came this year to offer us their time and energy or came just to share a meal and spend some time among the vines; to those who have not yet made the journey, but have supported us none-the-less with wine orders and encouragement; and to those who simply enjoy reading Vine Life: We wish you all the happiest of festive seasons. We hope that the New Year will bring you many occasions to drink good wine in good company.

Happy Christmas to you all.

A Good Year

To steal the title of a Russell Crowe movie set in a French vineyard, it has been A Good Year.

Despite the many challenges - the battles in January and February with botrytis outbreak and the difficult vintage that was the result, where so much fruit had to be thrown away - then the too-early arrival of Spring in late August that brought on bud burst. On the heels of that hot weather came the September hail storms that damaged the emerging buds, followed by the terrible frosts of October that killed many of our baby vines and almost wiped out our heritage block of old vines. And to cap all that off, we have just been smashed by a violent hailstorm that has destroyed another 10-15% of our fruit. Such is life in the vines. This summer is shaping up to be every bit as challenging as summer last year.

But, in spite of it all, we have loved every waking moment of another good year at Savina Lane.

This year we released and sold our first wines.

This year we excavated and started construction of our underground wine cellar, winery shed and the new cellar door.

This year we planted my 'forest' of more than 100 large deciduous trees and 250 shrubs in a hectare of irrigated garden beside the driveway up to our cottage.

This year the public closure of the little road into Savina Lane was approved and has now been fenced off.

This year too, we have taken our place in the local wine-growing community with Brad being 'drafted' to the Wine Committee of the Granite Belt Tourism Board.

It's too soon girls



A handful of potential that won't be realised this year. They can try again in 2014

Some vine varieties are just so well-behaved, requiring only minimal management.

No wonder we love our Graciano. This rare Spanish variety is a true Lady of Spain, producing a perfect balance of fruit to leaf, and only requires a little green harvesting at veraison to control the amount of fruit that each vine is allowed to ripen. (We strictly limit yield to between one and two tonnes maximum per acre).

But the Petit Manseng and Montepulciano baby vines planted in November 2012, look like competing with our Tempranillo for the title of wildest, most work-intensive variety.

The little vines had been hit hard by the frost and after being cut right back by Brad, should have kept their heads down and just concentrated on growing stronger roots and some new leaf. But these troublesome babies wanted to play with the big girls and so raced away at the first drop of rain and a few sunny days, shooting forth multiple bunches of fruit. So many were there on the bigger plants that if we had allowed them to grow into full-sized bunches, the whole plant couldn't have held its own weight. One small Montepulciano vine set 13 little bunches! Eight bunches was common.

Snipping off the miniature bunches was my job and I would go up to the new vineyard early in the morning and talk to them as I cut. It was an easy job and very peaceful, almost meditative, in the cool morning air and soft sunshine.

I suppose the little vines' enthusiasm to produce fruit augurs well for the future, but with all the extra workload caused by the frost and hail damage, we could have done with better-behaved children.

(And if you are wondering why I refer to them as 'girls', all vines are of the feminine gender in the language of their countries of origin. Either *la vigne* (French), *la vite* (Italian) or *la vid* (Spanish). We just like to make them feel at home).

Smashed by hail



Smashed and bruised berries quickly turn brown.

It seems the weather gods are determined to give us as much extra work as possible and push our resilience to the limit again this vintage.

In what seemed like only a few minutes, massive thunderheads built to stratospheric heights and the temperature plummeted. For 20 minutes, a violent hailstorm lashed our vineyard with icy balls that pierced and bruised any fruit not protected by a thick canopy of vine leaves and deposited almost an inch of rain that filled our canals.

We had just finished opening up many of the canopies to allow air to penetrate, in an attempt to avoid future botrytis problems. Now we are faced with an even greater threat of powdery mildew infection.

Brad was devastated. Around 10-15% of the crop has been wiped out. This comes on top of the 20% we lost previously to frost. Brad has been busy spraying organic compounds (copper and sulphur) onto the vines to try to seal up the wounds and protect from infection. Hopefully we'll still have a grape or two to pick next March, weather gods willing.

Last man's head, head, head, head...off!



The old shiraz vines looked sad by the time Brad had finished his frenzy of decapitations, but it probably hurt us more than it hurt them.

We felt like humming a funeral dirge as Brad guillotined vine after vine in our precious heritage block of 40 year-old shiraz.

The new season's growth, including the tiny bunches of fruit, had suffered terrible frost damage in October. This block was planted over 40 years ago from cuttings taken from an even older vineyard near Ballandean. The block was never irrigated so the vines struggled for survival, sending out roots far and wide in search of water and producing gorgeous wine with intense berry flavours.

While being on its own roots meant it would be more vulnerable (these days vine varieties are grafted onto tough, disease resistant rootstock), it also meant we could cut the vines right back and with luck, new shiraz suckers would emerge from healthy roots.

When we bought Savina Lane in February 2012, we found these old vines had been neglected and many gnarled trunks had split open. (This is often caused by frost). The split should have been attended to when it first occurred but over the years it had been ignored and so grew deeper, gradually spreading, in some cases to the roots. Less and less fruit was the result as the years passed, and the vines' vulnerability to frost and disease grew.

However after taking advice from our vine expert Mike Hayes, Brad is confident he may have saved the majority of the old vines with some timely amputations. However, a walk through the rows of wounded warriors is sobering. White wound dressing covers each little 'head' and there are hundreds of them. Saddest task of all was picking up the old twisted arms and heads and throwing them on the bonfire pile for burning.

We are watching the headless trunks carefully and nurturing any and all new suckers that may appear at ground level or above. Brad will tie all these up around the old trunk and later select the strongest of them to start training as a new trunk or cordon. So far quite a few new shoots have popped their heads out and that is encouraging. But there are still many who show no sign of any new suckers. The end of summer will show us whether these vines have survived.

The fruit left on the small number of healthy vines that remained intact after Brad's chainsaw massacre has just been badly hit by the recent hail, so it is looking like there will be no 2014 vintage of our Old Vine Shiraz. We may harvest a hundred kilos or so if the birds don't get it first, but it is unlikely we will have enough to bother crushing.

I guess that makes our 2012 and 2013 vintages even more precious.



Diary of a vineyard

We've been asked to put together an annual calendar of activities at Savina Lane so Vine Life readers can plan to be here to watch, or even to take part. Here is a month-by-month outline.

The first buds appear. Now is the time to ensure the vines have a regular drink to encourage healthy leaf and fruit set. Protective sprays using organic compounds such as sulphur or copper go on and a good nutrition program begins. We often take soil tests now to ensure a good balance of nutrients is available.

SEPTEMBER

BUD BURST - THE START OF OUR YEAR



The first line of grow-wire goes up as vine shoots are starting to hang out over the interrow. Now is the time to do any grafting work that is necessary. Constant checking for any sign of pests or disease starts now and continues until after vintage. This is a dangerous time for the vines due to the possibility of late frosts.

OCTOBER

FIRST GROW WIRES UP - ANY GRAFTS



Long shoots are heading skywards, so the second line of grow-wires needs to go up. Suckers that appear on the trunk or hanging down from the vine cordon need removing. If necessary some canopy management...the Shiraz and Tempranillo are maddies and produce lots of suckers. Weed control is important now as spring rains will have encouraged growth. This is a good time to repair any holes in nets.

NOVEMBER

CANOPY MANAGEMENT & 2ND WIRES UP



Time to hedge. I drive the ute while Brad stands in the back with the hedger and trims the long, long shoots from the top or sometimes sides, of each vine row. Checking for pests or disease is done almost every day now. Canopy management continues. We take off excess leaves to allow air (and protective sprays) to penetrate. The vines with huge leaves like the mad Tempranillo just 'tile' if we don't do this and nothing gets through to where needed.

DECEMBER

HEDGING & LEAF PLUCKING



Veraison. The change from green to red. The birds are hovering ready for a feast. We snip off any fruit we don't want including secondary growths which won't ripen and damaged fruit. This is also a way to control yield so the vine's energies go into ripening just one to two tonnes of fruit. It's a pleasurable and easy job. Protective sprays are put on now if needed. Bird nets must go on within days of veraison or the birds will quickly strip everything.

JANUARY

REMOVE EXCESS FRUIT & BIRD NETS ON



Check grapes for ripeness regularly. Take samples to the winery lab for analysis. The whites are always ready first. Clean picking buckets and replace any broken ones. Stock up on bin liners for the giant 400kg fruit megabins that are loaded with picked fruit and taken to the winery. Patrol the nets daily to release any trapped birds. Start to source fruitpickers.

FEBRUARY

PREPARE FOR VINTAGE



A year at Savina Lane

There is always a job to be done in the vines or the workshop and the grass never stops growing so the Z track mower gets used quite a bit, all of which is why Brad wakes up smiling every day.

MARCH

VINTAGE



Grape ripeness is assessed in lab and in vineyard. Grapes tasted for sweetness; seed checked to see if it comes out without flesh attached and chewed to see if crunchy. We look at the 'brush' (the little bit left on the stalk after the grape is removed) to see if dark brown/reddish colour or still pale. All this indicates ripeness. When both lab tests and vineyard assessment agree, the decision to harvest is made. Bird nets are removed the evening before harvest.

APRIL

FINAL HARVEST



Final harvest of any late ripening varieties (such as the Graciano although in 2013 it was harvested in the last days of March). As soon as harvest is over, Brad puts on post-harvest nutrition, which is usually chicken manure pellets (always from Queensland Organics which he says are the best), as well as protective sprays using organic compounds. By now the vine leaves are beginning to change colour.

MAY

AUTUMN GOLD - TIME FOR A HOLIDAY



Autumn gold and red is everywhere. A quiet time in the vineyard. The vines are bare by the end of the month. This is a good time to take a holiday or do some work in other areas of the property. This is also the perfect time to visit the Granite Belt for a winery tour and a walk through golden vineyards.

JUNE

LEAF FALL - NOT MUCH TO DO



By June leaf fall is complete. Time to carry out any new work that needs doing in the vineyard or just catch up with a good book in front of the fire. It is tempting to start pruning, but if this is done too early, vines may sprout again. We have to wait until they are dormant.

JULY

RUG UP - THE VINES ARE SLEEPING.



Winter is here. Rug up as the temps can fall well below freezing. The vines are now sleeping and Jack Frost makes regular visits. But this is also a dry time of year and days are crisp and glorious with plenty of sunshine. My favourite time of the year.

AUGUST

PRUNING, DRESS WOUNDS & BURN-OFF



Pruning time. The pruned canes need to be pulled out and dropped into piles in the vine rows. Any cuts bigger than the size of a 10c coin are coated with wound dressing. Brad's home-built cane rake then comes out to drag the small heaps of prunings into huge piles for burning. When pruning is over, all the grow-wires need to be dropped to the ground. This is the also time to burn long grass and any piles of tree cuttings that have accumulated over the year.

Nose, palate, passion



Winemaker Mike Hayes presented our Fiano to delegates at a Wine Industry Seminar organised by the Australian Wine Research Institute, at the Qld College of Wine Tourism during the year.

Successful winemakers need a barrel of talents. Aside from technical expertise, they need a good nose. That doesn't necessarily mean a big nose. Just one that can identify and separate aromas.

They also need the ability to separate flavours in different parts of the palate. Some people can do this so well they can tell which vineyard the wine has come from, because every vineyard has its own *terroir* - its specific location, soil and climate experience.

I can identify some berry aromas, but have no real talent for it. The same with palate. I drink the wine. It tastes good or not. Brad sniffs and tells me he can smell this and that and something else, then drinks the wine and carries on about the tannins, acid balance, front, back and mid palate and the 'finish'.

The nose and palate I would like to have are those belonging to our extraordinary winemaker Mike Hayes who is often mentioned in *Vine Life*. A wine-tasting with Mike is a fairytale thing. His face lights up as he begins to weave word-magic. There are nuances of chocolate, or ripe cherries, 'lifts' of citrus, peach or marmalade. You might say it is all hocus-pocus, but as everyone in the wine industry takes it all very seriously, I suppose these delicious aromas and tastes must really be there and it is a matter of luck or training that one can identify and describe them.

The other essential for excellence in winemaking is passion. A good winemaker is a passionate, sometimes driven, often cranky person who probably spends as much time dreaming about wine at night as he or she does making it during the day.

Mike is such a person. Full of nervous energy and passion for what he does.

Wine is his life and the passion for it began when he was just a small child, helping his father in the vineyard. He has done it all - planter, picker, pruner, vineyard manager and designer, wine marketer and for many years now, winemaker, lecturer and wine judge. He has worked in 16 wine regions in two countries.

Wines made by Mike Hayes have won almost every major award in Australia from Melbourne to Sydney to Canberra. He was the first Queenslander ever to have a gold medal wine at the Sydney Royal Wine Show. Since then the medal tally has grown to mountainous proportions. (We're hoping one day *Savina Lane* will add to his treasure chest).

Although he is now fully occupied as winemaker for Symphony Hill and its clients, Mike was the inaugural winemaker for Queensland's unique College of Wine Tourism. (It is the only one of its kind in Australia). He regularly lectures on alternative varieties, has been a wine judge numerous times and holds a Masters degree in viticulture.

Last year Mike won a prestigious Churchill Fellowship to study autochthonous (indigenes) grape varieties. He has just returned from a three-month study tour of European wine-growing regions.

All that expertise plus the outstanding facilities at Symphony Hill winery where Mike makes our wine has meant the learning curve for us has been gentler than it might have been.

You might say we were lucky to find Mike. But of course we have a good nose for such things.

“Accept what life offers you and try to drink from every cup. All wines should be tasted; some should only be sipped, but with others, drink the whole bottle.”

Paulo Coelho



Remind me never to get into the wedding veil business.

Taking the veil

It was a job I have been putting off since the nets were removed in late March, but finally I had to surround myself with great clouds of musty-smelling 'wedding veils' and set to.

With grapes growing apace and veraison on the horizon, I couldn't put off repairing the damaged bird-netting any longer. Some holes were enormous where trapped birds had been taken by large-toothed predators, but there were also many short pieces that needed to be sewn together. Little ends where the previous owner had just cut the length a titch too short. All of which required time-consuming hand-stitching. Each net is about 120 metres long by five metres wide. Some needed two or even three pieces to be joined.

Fortunately, out of more than 60 nets, there were only seven to do, but several had to have more than one join.

I set up my 'sewing room' in the old shed, sitting comfortably in an outdoor chair with pins, scissors, twine and water bottle, at my side. Each day I chose a slightly different view of the lake which gave me something to look at when I wasn't pushing the huge needle with marine-strength twine, through the netting holes. The nets are very stretchy so it took a bit of messing about to ensure when I finally got to the other side, the two pieces 'ended' together. I'm hoping that's the end of this so-called (by Brad) 'one-off' job. Unless the local predators get their teeth into something other than grapes again this year.

Concrete convoy

A bevy of voluptuous concrete trucks arrived the other day. The first of many to lumber past my office window in the months ahead.

Work has finally started on the new winery complex. A massive elephant-trunk pumped out tonnes of runny concrete (nine truckloads) and it seemed the whole floor of the new underground wine cellar was covered in no time. Then our marvellous local expert concreter, Trevor Marsden, pulled out his 'helicopters' and smoothed it all off like glass.

By mid next year we hope to have the basic structure finished and will then take our time to finish and equip the internal areas.

Might have a building to show you next issue.



Reds out of beds



Brad in the winery lab trying out his nose

Mike Hayes woke up our 2012 red wines last month. They had been sleeping in barrels since mid-June last year. Now in bottles, they've been put back to sleep until early 2015.

We spent a morning in the winery tasting our red wines and are thrilled with their progress. The Old Vine Shiraz is an absolute stand-out, although unlikely to win gold medals according to Mike, as big, complex shiraz is currently out of fashion with the wine show judges who are looking for lighter styles these days. Think Burgundy rather than Bordeaux. We couldn't care less about the judges, we love this wine and as there is hardly any of it, probably wouldn't have enough to enter shows anyway.

The Spanish Graciano is a 'majestic' wine according to Mike. And our lively Tempranillo just dances on the palate. We expect all of them to improve in their bottles until we release them in 2015. By then our cellar door will be open so we will be able to showcase our reds properly.

We will have a few of the 2012 reds at Savina Lane for ongoing assessment over the next 18 months. If you are lucky enough to be here when we decide to try them, you can join us for a taste or two.



Wine walkers

We hosted a group of local wine industry people a few weeks ago. Many had never been to Savina Lane before and were interested to see Brad's net taker-offer and putter-onner demonstrated. The local wine-growers and winemakers hold regular 'wine walks' in different vineyards to discuss various topics at timely intervals. Sometimes we have special guest speakers. This time the group took the chance to relax and enjoy a Christmas wine and a few nibbles together afterwards on our deck. Our bottle bin was overflowing with some very fine empties the next day.

FIONA FIANO

We've had some wonderful comments from Vine Life Friends about our 2012 Fiano. This wine is just getting better and better as it ages.

It is encouraging to hear from you and especially when it's to tell us you've enjoyed the wine with a meal of such and such.

Only a small quantity of the 2012 vintage remains now and there won't be any more Savina Lane wine until 2015.

The Fiano is the 'other woman' around here. Brad is always up there stroking, fondling or fiddling with this block. But there is something about the Fiano. Brad tells me she responds well to Leonard Cohen, which he plays while working there.

The Fiano is quite different to the feral Shiraz or utterly mad Tempranillo. She's a beautiful, elegant lady according to my much-enamoured husband.

Personally, I think 'she' is just a block of rather attractive vines, but perhaps it's just that I have no imagination!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Cheers Fiona".



S A V I N A
Lane

SAVINA LANE WINES
90 Savina Lane, Severnlea
Q 4380, Australia
savinalane@bigpond.com

07 4683 5377