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LURED TO THE BUSH BY A VINE ROMANCE

A group of passionate and committed growers who have changed their lives for the grape are turning heads and impressing southerners with the quality drops being produced in Granite Belt country

WORDS
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Why would a 73-year-old former chemist give it all up to take on a new occupation – working 100 hours a week in a job that never makes a profit?

Well-respected Ballandean winemaker Adrian Tobin refers to himself as a “wine tragic”, someone for whom the thrill of hand-pruning and harvesting his vintage each year, makes up for the lack of profit.

“We’ve never made a penny here in 14 years – we run at a loss. What we do is an artform; I see myself as an artisan,” Mr Tobin said.

Nestled in the high altitude, cool climate area that most of the Granite Belt’s wineries call home, Mr Tobin makes a loss every year, despite the fact that he can’t keep up with demand for his elegant, fruit-centric wines.

He’s in it for the love of it, and the chance to prove Queensland is just as capable of producing great drops as our southern counterparts.

“Southerners look at Queensland as a tropical paradise, and you can’t grow grapes in a tropical paradise, so they discount us totally,” he said. “They don’t know that this (the Granite Belt) paradise exists.”

Strolling through the immaculate Tobin Wines vineyard, a glass of the excellent, vanilla-scented barrel-aged Lily chardonnay in hand, Mr

Tobin explained that his wines – that retail for up to \$65 a bottle – are grown, rather than made, with 95 per cent of labour dedicated to the vineyard, where fruit is picked based on taste, rather than sugar concentration.

“We don’t want to interfere with the unique character of the fruit. You can’t have anything nice in the bottle unless you have excellent starting material.”

He’s had a lifelong love of wine, dating back to his university years when he’d be the odd man out when his mates turned to beer.

“I saved all my pennies to go on a pilgrimage to the Hunter Valley, where I got my first introduction to wine and formed an opinion of what it’s all about. After a while, I came to the conclusion that you don’t make a good wine, you grow it. It’s all about achieving excellent fruit.”

Brisbane wine critic Tomy Harper has named Tobin as one of his top 10 Australian wineries, and described its semillon as better than it’s Hunter Valley contemporaries.

“It has all the good things you’d expect from serious Hunter Valley semillon with age – toast, honey and lemon curd... with a little more weight and richness,” he wrote. “It’s simply an amazing wine, mature now, but still with the ability to age gracefully for a further five years or more.”

Mr Tobin is a perfectionist – the vines are pruned only by him, the barrels used to age his wine whites, including the aforementioned Lily

chardonnay, are used only once, lest they taint the fruit. In the tasting room, a fresh glass is offered for each wine, proudly named after his grandchildren, with individually numbered labels. He’s reluctant to let restaurants present one of his white wines with a wine bucket.

“That is zero degrees – you can’t taste or smell anything at that temperature,” he said. Thirty minutes out of the fridge is best, so the wine sits at 10-12 degrees.

With more than 500 people on his wine club list, he’s contemplating shutting the cellar door and selling only to his captive audience. Yet Tobin Wines remains relatively unknown to the wider community. He relies on income from his other business, Urban Art Projects, which he runs with his sons, to keep afloat.

“If I wanted to make money, I’d have gone to the Barossa or Hunter Valley, but I’m a Queensland-lander. I wasn’t going to do it anywhere else.”

“The industry here is minuscule, really. In Australia last year, we harvested 18 million tonnes of grapes. In Queensland, we harvested 11,000 tonnes, so we account for something like .001 per cent of the industry.”

The industry’s tiny size, and tropical Queensland image, hinders local wineries, he said.

“Other winemakers tell me I could sell these (wines) for three or four times the price. Queenslanders still don’t understand that we can make

good wine down here. They’re happy to pay \$100 for a bottle of McLaren Vale shiraz, but not for a Queensland wine.”

So does he foresee the region being taken seriously by the country’s wine connoisseurs?

“We’ll get there eventually, maybe not in my lifetime – I’m 73 – but maybe eventually.”

Symphony Hill Wines chief executive officer Ewen Macpherson is more hopeful. Rated five-stars by wine critic James Halliday, the relatively new winery’s top drops were served to Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, during their whirlwind Brisbane tour.

“It was a great thrill to see them served something local from the Granite Belt, and it really mirrors what’s happening in Brisbane at the moment,” Mr Macpherson said. “Queensland-wide, food and wine have got so much better.”

The first vintage of their reserve shiraz scored gold medals at both Royal Sydney and Melbourne wine shows, with their other wines, including a pinot gris, verdelho, petit verdot and cabernet sauvignon, available at ARIA, in the city, and QPAC’s Russell Street Wine Bar.

So how does a Queensland shiraz face off against one from the Barossa region?

“I call it an Edith Piaf-style of wine, compared to Dolly Parton – high in alcohol with a big body. Ours is elegant, more a Rhone-style shiraz, that really surprises people from down south.”

At an altitude of 1000m, the cool climate



WHERE TO STAY AND PLAY

SPRING CREEK MOUNTAIN CAFE AND COTTAGES, KILLARNEY
 At this charming cafe and cabins en route to Stanthorpe, owner Bey Ruskey oversees the kitchen, which turns out rustic fare, such as hearty beef and shiraz pie, or almond-crusted barramundi, with sauteed kipflers and chorizo. Stay in one of the cabins for the night, with a roaring fire, and you'll wake up to warm croissants, fresh fruit and house-made preserves, and a choice of hot dishes, such as goats cheese omelette with spinach and mushrooms.
springcreekcottages.com.au

ALURE, STANTHORPE
 A little off the beaten track, Alure has two villas and one luxury tent on a large private property. The fully equipped kitchens have coffee machines and breakfast provisions, such as fresh raspberries and homemade granola, yoghurt and croissants. The lounge has a big-screen plasma, wood fire, enormous red leather couch and good DVD library. Or take a bottle of local sparkling wine from the mini bar to the private outdoor heated spa to enjoy the night sky.
ahrestanthorpe.com.au

THE BARREL ROOM CAFE, BALLANDEAN ESTATE WINES, BALLANDEAN
 With a handful of Ballandean Estate Wines on pour, this cafe buzzes in winter. Matt and Bobbi Wells, who trained at the Sunshine Coast's now defunct The Wine Bar under chef Tony Kelly, put a fine dining twist on country fare. Duck comes as a trio of orange and pistachio neck sausage, confit Maryland and pan-fried breast, and the roast pork belly with Israeli couscous and hummus. Pastas include a beef ragu and a delicate sand crab cannelloni.
ballandeanestate.com/barrelroomcafe.aspx

WHILE YOU'RE THERE ...
 Excellent walking trails around Girraween National Park range from an easy 500m circuit, to the 6.2km Buaraba Creek track. In Killarney, Queen Mary Falls will reward a short hike with superb views. The caravan park, opposite the walking trails, has fresh scones and T2 teas every day. For the quintessential Stanthorpe experience, visit Sutton's iconic apple farm and shed cafe, for slices of the massive homemade apple pie and pure bottled juice.
suttonsfarm.com.au

wines are vastly different to others produced within the region. "Our petite verdot is grown on a different lot, 400m down because it's too cool up here. It just produces a totally different wine.

"I believe this region is like the promised land of viticulture. It's very vast, with different micro climates. More and more people are discovering they have their own very ultra-premium wine district just around the corner."

Down the road from Symphony Hill, Twisted Gum vineyard is also turning heads. Owners Tim and Michelle Coelli moved from Brisbane - where Tim was an economics professor at the University of Queensland, and Michelle an environmental scientist with the government.

Mrs Coelli said buying the vineyard, a 40ha property, meant they could bring up their four children in the country, and pair Tim's love of wine with her agriculture skills.

"We have 3ha under vine, plus the cellar door, a guest cottage and our home. The rest is bushland," she said. "We want to be environmentally sustainable, so a huge part of that is biodiversity, so having the flora and the fauna of the bushland creates a real balance."

It's a dry vineyard - Mrs Coelli doesn't irrigate. She uses mulch, and has a horse graze (and in turn, fertilise) the vines in winter. It's a risky decision, she said, with an expectation of yielding 3-4 tonnes of fruit per hectare, compared with an average of 10-12 tonnes in the rest of the region.

"The quality is so much better ... it lets me run the property as an environmentally sustainable project. With less yield, we have less input, which means less fertiliser and less potential damage to the environment. We use only the fruit that we grow, whereas most people would supplement by buying in fruit. The low yield does produce really high-quality fruit - it's more intensive and does give distinctive flavours."

The pink moscato is a bestseller, but Mrs Coelli is more proud of their unique verdelho, semillon and chardonnay blend. "It's perfect for the Brisbane heat," she said. They also produce an inky shiraz and cabernet sauvignon that has "excellent tannin and structure from the small berries. Small fruit means intensive flavour".

The Twisted Gum cellar door has been operating for just a year, but has already established a strong following. Mrs Coelli is optimistic about the future of Queensland wine. "There is this staunch supporting crowd that comes up year after year ... they will tell you that there has been a huge change in what Queensland has been producing.

"Slowly people's eyes are opening to the fact that what we are producing is just as good as other states," Mrs Coelli said.

Pleasant paths:
 Twisted Gum Wines'
 Michelle and Tim
 Coelli with Gus
 (main); and (top)
 Ewen Macpherson of
 Symphony Hill Wines;
 and Adrian Tobin of
 Tobin Wines. Photos:
 Anthony Weate.

