**OPINION & ANALYSIS**

**Chasing Hunter vigneronons keep it in the family**

**Philip O'Neill**

THE grape harvest has ended and the dusty paddocks and rocky Pokolbin locals are looking pleased enough.

The beat of the drums signals, too, that winemakers’ magic is now at work. The first vintage of a new decade is under way.

Become, oh mighty vigneron and winemakers, the news falls gently on ears up and down the Hunter. We shared your fears of hail and mildew and other nasties. Too we are pleased that the rural cycle has run its course for another year, and that all is well.

Elsewhere around Australia, however, the drumming is troubled. Wine companies are worrying things to shareholders. It seems these companies are not exactly finding strategies – aggressive selling of low-priced wines in the UK and North American markets – altogether satisfying, somewhat.

A strong Aussie dollar has made our wine more expensive. Wineries from New Zealand, Chile and South Africa are getting plenty of cheap new-world plonk on British and American supermarket shelves alongside ours. Then there is a serious oversupply of grapes, especially from the buoyant vineyards in the Riverina and along the Murray in South NSW and Victoria and into the Riverland district of South Australia.

Industry reports say Australia has been producing between 20 and 40 million more cases of wine annually than it has been selling in recent years. Getting back into the industry would mean rippling out 30,000 to 40,000 hectares of vines, a herding of vineyards and wineries into the critical hunt for large grape wine in the first place.

Fosters, the beer company, which also owns a stake of wine labels through its purchase of Suntory, and the Larringer Blaus wine groups, reported recently that the glut would cost the company $75 million this financial year.

The US-owned Constellation Brands, based on the old ERL- Hardy wineries, is backing away from our shores by merging its local interests with Australian Vintage, a company with the McGuigan name on its books.

Our third giant, Orlando, owned by the global wine and spirit company Pernod Ricard, estimates the downturn will cost it $60 million in write-downs and restructuring costs.

Certainly such turmoil makes life tough for a family-run or small-sized Hunter wine producer keen to get a fair price for a good product, but confronted by shelves in supermarket liquor stores choked a block with under-priced bargains.

At the same time, though, Hunter wine producers are relieved their local industry will be largely spared the cut-backs and restructuring under way elsewhere, and the dreadful consequences for many grape growers and suppliers that would follow.

The local industry knows it has *coddled a budgel*. Tourist pamphlets say there are 120 Hunter Valley wineries and ill-defined. This is about double the number a decade ago, and the big corporations don’t have a big presence.

Which is a change from the 1980s and 1990s, when the Hunter’s wine industry was the playing of big corporate winemakers and those seeking to become big corporate wineries.

Lindemans, for example, was rounded up by the Penfolds group – remember the name plastered across the St George footy jumper? – and later merged with another local, Rosemount, within Fosters Ltd. Likewise Rothbury Estate was lassoed by the Mildara Blass group, and it too found its way into the Fosters conglomerate.

The wild ride of the times, however, was Brian McGuigan’s herding of vineyards and wineries the length and breadth of the valley into the Wynnum Estate Group. But then McGuigan lost control of Wynnum and the assets were saddled up with the South Australian Orlando wineries before riding away with the French multinational Pernod Ricard.

Intriguingly, though, very few of the Hunter’s vineyard and winemaking assets have stayed with the corporate giants. Most – like Rothbury – have been sold back into local hands.

What each of the giants discovered, eventually, was that the Hunter is actually a small grape growing and winemaking region, measured by volume.

Last year the Hunter grew only 15 per cent of Australia’s winemaking grapes, which isn’t enough to maintain the interest of a big company seeking to fill big vats for cheap exports.

Instead, Hunter winemaking has largely returned to its 1980s and 1990s roots: quality family outfits with long histories, intermingled with a few Sydney interlopers with more dollars than sense, but sharing a love for the red clays of the valley and the delights that they bring.

**Sharonie Guest** is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

---

**Soapy sulks silently told that shining story**

There’s a sermon in the grottiest kitchen sink, writes Sharonie Guest.

LITTLE things can sometimes make me mad. Like dirty dishes. A bowl, a mug and four spoons to be exact.

Each dripping wet, covered in last meal, I removed them from the dishwasher. I turned on the water as I heard my moaning.

It’s not that I am bothered by housework. I am a bit of a dirty freak, I have to get the dishes clean before I can consider a job done. If you’re upset about people leaving dirty dishes in the sink, there’s a better and more professional way to go about it, I continued, but only the dishcloth heard my meaning.

Way to make a point! I muttered in outstretched arms as I heard my reply: no, but he certainly washed dirty feet.

I returned to the kitchen. As I filled the sink with hot, soapy water and began washing dirty dishes, I imagined the looks on the faces of the shocked and embarrassed disciples in an upstairs room as Jesus down on his hands and knees to do someone else’s job and wash their dirty feet.

When Jesus imposed his hands in sticky, foot-fungus-infected water to show that he came to wash away the congealed mess of our sinful lives.

With this image vivid in my mind, I began to wash the other dirty dishes scattered around the neglected kitchen, cleaning the sink and sweeping away the crumbs.

Jesus answered the WWJD question in Luke 6:35, saying: “I tell you, love your enemies. Help find without expecting a return. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives towards us: generously and graciously, even when we’re at our worst.”

And then Jesus demonstrated the answer with outstretched arms as he carried our dirty dishes, our dirty feet, our dirty lives to the cross, and through his own death made us sparkling clean.

And he got a whole lot more than dishpan hands in the process.

---

**Topics today**

**Elizabethan facial cleaners were made of donkey’s milk, red wine and urine.**

**Newton: bidrag – small aquatic organisms stabilising the surface layer or moving on the surface.**

**It happened today**

From our files – 1966: Newcastle City Council has decided to hear speakers for and against fluoridation of the city’s water supply. Arguments for said that fluoridation was an effective dental health measure and should not be delayed.

**Today in history**

1781: James Burke receives first official NSW MLC grant.

1839: Frank Winfield Woolworth opens a five-cent store in Utica, New York.

1886: The Times becomes the first British newspaper to institute a personal column on its classified page.

1928: Australian aviator Bert Hinkler arrives in Darwin in Avro Avian, completing first UK-Australia solo flight from Croydon in 15½ days.

1972: In Britain, an IRA bomb explodes at an army officers’ mess in Aldershot, killing seven people.


2009: European leaders mount a united front against the global economic crisis, proposing stricter market regulation and caps on executive salaries.

**Born today**

George Washington, first US president (1732-1799); Frederick Chopin, Polish composer (1810-1849); Lord (Robert) Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scout movement (1857-1941); Norman Lindsay, Australian artist (1879-1969); John Mills, British actor (1908-2005); Edward Kennedy, US politician (1932-2009); Steve Irwin, pictured, Australian naturalist (1962-2006); Vijay Singh, Fiji golfer (1963-); Drew Barrymore, US actress (1975-).

**Odd spot**

A funeral home in northern Australia has stumbled upon a novel way of advertising for more business: by placing a hearse at dangerous crossroads, bearing the words “We are always here for you.” Its website is www.rpt.a.