

Georgia Wilson, winegrower, Foster

One might ask, how does a girl from Minnesota end up in Australia dreaming of establishing a cult winery?

Get yourself a cuppa, sit down and I'll share my story with you.

I had a great time growing up in a Virginia, Minnesota. It's a small town situated on the Mesabi Iron Range in Northern Minnesota....about 30 miles east of where Bob Dylan grew up.

It was a pretty normal upbringing headed by the best parents in the world. I was a very active youngster who loved playing sport. From swimming and running track events to team sports like volleyball and ice hockey, I liked them all. I also enjoyed learning and loved school.

During my university years, I took up scuba diving. I was on my way back from a dive trip in the Bahamas when I started dreaming of diving the Great Barrier Reef. And that dream led me to Australia. There was a shortage of teachers in Australia back then and I was just completing my Mathematics and Phys Ed teaching degree. So on August 27, 1975, I landed at Tullamarine Airport with 88 pounds of belongings....most of it scuba gear.

My first teaching assignment was Fairhills High School in Knoxfield. I was only going to stay 18 months, do some diving, then head back to the States.

I loved the Aussie laid-back culture, especially the idea of mateship as described in John Williamson's song, 'True Blue'. I started barracking (quickly learned that rooting wasn't the term) for the Bulldogs, drinking beer, eating pies and of course...the ubiquitous wine bottlings!!

There was a group of us who regularly got together to share food, using the *Women's Weekly Dinner Party Cookbook* as a guide and our own judgement as to what wine would be the best match for each course. All wines were masked in brown paper bags and after we pontificated over vintage, variety, region and winemaker the bags would be removed to reveal all....a great way to sharpen one's palate.

Besides these food and wine-matching dinners, school holidays were spent exploring different wine regions.

This is where Graeme, my husband and co-owner of Windy Ridge Vineyard and Winery, taught me the virtues of developing a 10-year cellar. It was a concept I couldn't understand; my attitude was 'why not drink it now'?

I'm glad he persevered. He taught me to trust my palate, to look for a wine that was structurally sound with good acid, fruit and tannin. As a consequence, we are now pulling some stunning wines out of our private collection.

Graeme used to make small batches of wine at home. He'd start by crushing the grapes in the bathroom, fermenting the wine in the lounge room, pressing the wine in the laundry and then bottling it in the kitchen. One day he told me that he wanted to give up teaching (he taught Maths and Science), buy a vineyard and make wine properly. I told him that he was nuts (or words to that effect) and I'd only shift from my dream home in Kallista to somewhere near a beach. I thought I had him snookered because I knew we couldn't afford property on the Mornington Peninsula. AND THEN, one Saturday afternoon as he was going through *The Age* newspaper, he found it....for sale....42 acres between Foster and Fish Creek, 14 acres of it established vineyard, blah blah blah.....near the beach.

To cut a long story short, within a month we were proud owners of that property. We sold up everything in Melbourne, traded in a Mazda 626 for a Holden Rodeo Ute, bought a dog and moved into two caravans with no running water, electricity or indoor plumbing. Pioneering days, indeed.

I didn't adjust to the shift very well and it took me 18 months to realise how fortunate I was. It can be hard work at times, but it is always rewarding. And as I'm writing this story on this cold winter's day, I'm counting my blessings.

That was back in 1985. It's taken us awhile to get things up and running. Our first vintage was in 1988. We opened cellar door in 1995 and we are still operating today. Our motto is: **we grow it, we make it, we bottle it.....and you enjoy it.**

So why am I dreaming of establishing a cult winery?

Well, what we do is unique...a bit different to big wineries. We have a hands-on approach to our winemaking and it starts in the vineyard. The Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec are cane-pruned. The Sauvignon Blanc and Traminer are spur-pruned...a three to four-month process.

Springtime brings growth. Graeme developed a specific canopy management program that suits our vineyard. We have found that this program allows good airflow which helps mildew control and allows the sun to penetrate but not burn the fruit. Long canes are hand-trimmed to a size that will allow the tractor and motorbike to get between the vine rows without breaking off the canes.

Summertime, we don't irrigate. This and the fact that the vines were planted in 1978 ensure that each vintage will produce a wine that is unique from year to year.

Towards the end of summer as the fruit is changing colour (veraison), nets are deployed to protect the crop from birds. The smallest net covers only seven rows and the largest net covers 14 rows. Graeme throws the net over a row and I catch it. This is done one row at a time....great weight training!

Graeme and I do it all by ourselves EXCEPT when it comes to harvest. For this we have our dedicated picking team. They are a special group of people who want to be part of the process. They come because they want to. Even though it can be hard work, there is a lot of laughter and many stories...some true and some not so true...shared in between the vines...and of course, at the celebration dinner when the day is finished. I like to secretly think they come because of my Windy Ridge slow-cooked leg of lamb.

Within 30 minutes of harvest the grapes are taken up to the winery and then they are put through the crusher/destemmer. The skins and juice ferment in an open stainless steel milk vat until the ferment is finished, usually seven to 10 days. Then the juice is pumped out into a holding vat and the skins are hand basket-pressed. Our wines are stored in a combination of new and seasoned oak barrels....the Pinot Noir usually for two years and the Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec up to three years. We let our wines soften naturally, that means we don't use fining products (such as egg, milk, fish or clay) to soften our wines. And we don't filter our wines either, we let nature do that, too.

We bottle the wine using a gravity-feed system. I make sure each bottle has the right quantity and Graeme selects each cork for quality and inserts them with a special machine...one at a time. We can bottle up to 1200 a day. Then protective capsules are individually heat shrunk on the bottle and then they are boxed and stored. Labels are hand- applied when wines are needed for sale.

Our story has been written up in several magazines and newspapers. But when we appeared on the cover of the *Weekly Times Farm Magazine* in February, we were flattered....now I know how rock stars feel when they appear on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*.

Our wines have won many awards. The most prestigious accolade was when our Pinot Noir was selected out of a stable of predominantly Yarra Valley Pinot Noirs as the 2007 People's Choice Award held at a Duck and Pinot Convention at Marylands Country House in Marysville.

So each bottle of Windy Ridge wine has a story to tell....mainly of the season that produced it. And the wines age well because of the care that has been taken to make them. We already have established a solid repeat customer base.

And maybe....just maybe one day....in order to have a Windy Ridge Wine in your cellar you would have to order it before it is released.