

Crush hour

Hand-picked and foot-pressed, this year's vintage is in the bottle.

Josie licks my heel as I step into the vat of crimson grapes. It seems wrong to fulfill a childhood dream of stomping grapes with cattle-dog saliva on my foot and less than ideal for the people who would end up drinking this shiraz, but the winemaker is far from perturbed.

Apparently, the magical fermentation process that converts these swollen grapes into luscious wine will annihilate any lurking nasties.

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But things are a little more restrained here in the Hunter Valley, where some of the old-fashioned ways of winemaking are on the return.

We had hand-picked the shiraz in one of the high sloping vineyards on Wandin Valley Estate in the morning, relishing a break in the rain that has plagued this year's vintage.

Until six weeks ago, 2002 was shaping as a dazzling year for the Hunter. The grapes – chardonnay, semillon, shiraz, cabernet and other regional varieties – hung succulent on the vines. The sun had coaxed their flesh to develop delicious flavours and the Baumé scale (the index of sugar content that indicates how alcoholic the wine will be) was high.

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Then, in mid-January, the rains came. The danger at this crucial stage of vintage is that Baumés may not develop properly, the flavours could wash out of the grapes or, worse, they could rot on the vine.

Winemakers across Australia are pretty edgy right now. Vintage is always a frenetic, nerve-racking eight weeks, the pinnacle of the winemakers' year when all their work (the pruning, caning, spraying, watering and tender loving care) reaches a crescendo.

Most Australian regions, including those in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia, have been affected by the wet and many winemakers are harvesting late as they wait for grapes to fully ripen.

Wandin Valley is a couple of weeks behind when I arrive in late February. Sitting on the veranda eating lunch, James Davern, the vigneron (owner), peers at the gunmetal sky and predicts more rain for the following day when we plan to pick the premium "Bridie" shiraz grapes.



Fact file

Wandin Valley Estate is a boutique winery in the Lovedale region of the Hunter Valley that produces about 8,000 cases of wine a year, mainly chardonnay, semillon, verdelho, shiraz, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet merlot. Top of the range is the Bridie's Shiraz, \$28, and Huon Hooke rates the verdelho in his picks of the 2000 vintage. About 60 per cent of sales are cellar-door, but for Sydney stockists call 4930 7317.

Winemaking made easy

White wine. Pick the grapes, crush and destem, press out the juice, pump into vat, add yeast and ferment. After several days, pump off the lees, add a clarifying agent, pass through filter pads and bottle. (This does not include chardonnay: see red wine).

Red wine. Pick the grapes, crush and destem, macerate for a day or so, pump into vat, add yeast and ferment. Keep pushing the caps into the ferment and, after about a week, separate liquid from the skins and pump into barrels. Leave for at least nine months. Stabilise, filter then bottle. Drink.

Ripe for the picking: 1. The steel bins hold one tonne of grapes. 2. Foot power. 3. SK pumping wine from the crusher. 4. The crusher. 5. A dog's life. 6. Checking the ferment. 7. Crushed grapes. 8. Picking at dawn. 9. Splat and a spray of red. 10. The tractor and the pickers. 11. The barrel room. 12. Your correspondent in the fields. Photos: Sahlan Hayes

"What you are seeing now is what every winemaker does not want to see," he says as the rain drops in thuds on the red soil.

Sarah Kate Wilson, the winemaker (known to everyone as SK) does not seem to share his gloomy forecast. Davern may not be an expert, anyway. He spent much of his working life in television, conceiving and producing the hit show *A Country Practice* (hence the estate's name). He used to bring a team of writers to a hideaway near the Hunter to brainstorm scripts and stumbled across this vineyard, then called Millstone, which he and his wife, Philippa, bought in 1990.

"The name Millstone seemed rather ominous to me, whereas I thought calling it Wandin Valley would make sure we got a steady stream of people to our cellar door," Davern says.

Two years ago, they poached SK from the nearby McGuigan winery. Now 28, she is young in her trade, even among the growing gang of youthful winemakers in the Hunter, and still something of a novelty due to her gender. She is in charge of the 10 hectares of vines on the 40-hectare property, which has a cricket oval and pavilion, a tennis court and swimming pool.

"Unless it is bucketing down tomorrow, we will pick," SK says. The grapes cannot be left a day longer.

At 6.30 the next morning the pickers arrive. They cluster round the vines having a quick cigarette before pulling on rubber gloves and arming themselves with snippers and black plastic buckets. The John Deere tractor rumbles up from the winery towing a steel bin that will hold one tonne of grapes; our mission is to fill five bins in the next five to six hours.

The clouds are dark, but they don't look like they'll dump on us. Even in the early morning gloom the vines look gorgeous, their thick, green canopy protecting the perfect bundles of grapes.

But they are not quite perfect: SK has spotted a nasty called sooty mould on some. This eats at the flesh, leaving the affected grapes mangy looking and smelling of vinegar. SK darts around to the 11 pickers, showing them what the mould looks like and instructing them to cut those grapes away or discard the bundle. Most of the grapes are OK, however, and we begin our locust-like attack on the vines.

Though in a permanent stoop, it is pleasantly methodical work. You can smell the sweet berry aromas of the grapes and, without rubber gloves, hands are quickly coated in a lovely sticky syrup. Bucket after bucket is filled and thrown into the steel bin with a splat and a spray of red juice. SK and her blue heeler, Maynard, ride on the tractor that slowly chugs through the vines in front of us; sometimes she yells at the pickers if they work too slow, but today it's a "good team".

The first bin is filled in an hour and whisked back to the winery. By 10.30am, after a break about 8am spent perched on an Esky eating sandwiches, five tonnes of grapes have been plucked from the vines. "It's been a good morning," SK says.

The pickers have snipped quickly (though a machine would have done it in less than half the time) and, having collected their cheques, are gone. Back at the winery, the grapes that have been nurtured and pampered all year face a rude fate. They are lifted by crane and tipped into a receiver then pushed into a crusher-destemmer, a cruel machine that rips the stems off the grapes then crushes the flesh and skin into a sweet liquid pulp. (Human feet, being kinder than the machine's teeth, are sometimes used to crush some of the grapes, though they are not very effective at removing the stems.)

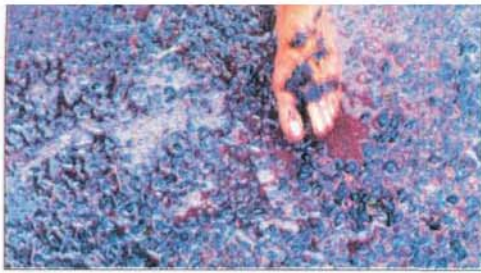
Once crushed, the juice and skins are pumped into a huge vat where they will be left to macerate (basically, stew) for several days. "I wait all year for vintage, I love it," SK says as she hoes the last of the grapes into the receiver. "I especially couldn't wait this year, I went to the Rhône last September for vintage and I picked up all these ideas which I couldn't wait to put into practice."

Maynard and the other Wandin Valley Estate dogs, Josie and Sly, love it, too. They thirstily lick the ground where juice from the crusher has spilled.

SK, like most winemakers, works around the clock during this time of the season. "Heaps of us go to the pub on a Friday night, but after two drinks we collapse on the floor," she says.

A couple of days that week she had been up at 2am to check the progress of the mechanical picker, which was harvesting some of the red-wine grapes.

Wandin Valley uses a combination of mechanical and hand picking; the hand picking is more expensive and time consuming, but preferred because it is gentler on the grapes, unlike the steal claws of the picking machine,



which literally shakes the fruit off the vines.

Gathering the grapes is only a small part of the job. The process of fermenting, monitoring, barrelling and bottling the wine is scientific and labour intensive. SK says, modestly, that winemaking is 3 per cent science, 2 per cent art and 95 per cent cleaning up.

Indeed, the shed we are in is surgically clean with huge steel vats, pumps, hoses, gauges and dials. It would all seem very clinical if not for the smell of fermenting grapes. The aroma of yeast working its magic hits every time I walk into the winery. Green apples, grapefruit, toast - it is a marvellous smell.

While the grapes we picked in the morning macerate, those in the surrounding tanks are furiously bubbling and fermenting already. Boiling it down, fermentation is the conversion of sugar by yeast to produce alcohol, along with heat and carbon dioxide.

There are 28 tanks in the Wandin Valley winery, about a third of them filled with white grapes such as chardonnay, semillon and verdelho, harvested early in the vintage.

There is a walkway over all the tanks so SK can take their lids off each day and peer inside to check that the fine bubbles of carbon dioxide look and smell healthy. Grapes contain "wild" yeast and could ferment naturally, but most wineries inject yeast into the wine once the grapes have been crushed and, in the case of whites, pressed and the juice pumped into the cold vats.

Once they have fermented for several days, unwooded

white wines such as semillon, riesling and verdelho are pumped off their lees (the dead yeast cells at the bottom of the tank) into another tank where the liquid is clarified (this makes the wine clear), filtered and then bottled. It is a more complex procedure with red wines and wooded whites such as chardonnay.

Cap management is crucial in red wine making. SK explains that, when the reds are fermenting, the carbon dioxide pushes the skins to the top. We look into a tank where this has happened; there is a metre thick mass of seething skins, smelling as rich and fruity as Christmas cake batter. But they are no good at the top of the tank because much of the flavours, colours and tannins are in the skins; they need to be stirred and pushed into the juice.

This is cap management and it must be done three times a day during ferment. Liquid can be "pumped over" from the bottom of the tank or SK can reach in through the lid with a huge masher and "plunge" the cap.

After fermenting for up to 10 days, the red is pressed then pumped into barrels, where it ages for up to a year.

We wander into the barrel room, where about 400 barriques (barrels) are neatly piled three or four high. The air is thick with more wonderful smells of yeast, bread and oak.

I take the stoppers off some of the barrels, press my ear to the hole and listen to the wine fizzing like aspirin (this is because some of the wine goes through a secondary fermentation in the barrels, called malolactic fermentation, which makes it softer and rounder).

We take samples of last year's vintage from the barrels. It is amazing how different they taste, not just because of the different varieties, such as a cabernet compared with a shiraz, but because of the different types of oak they are aged in.

American oak gives the wine vanillin and burnt-sugar flavours, while French oak imparts a sweeter, more delicate taste.

By this time my head is spinning, not from the wine we have sampled, but from digesting the hugely involved process of making a humble bottle of plonk. SK has shown me only the basics and we have hardly touched the sides, as it were.

Even when the wooded wines have finished maturing, there is still the crucial work of blending to be done. Shiraz aged in French and American oak can be mixed, for example, with a dash of cabernet for body.

I disagree with SK: there is some science and cleaning up involved in winemaking, but mostly it is alchemy. Indeed, the people who drink the wine crushed by my feet will certainly hope that's the case.