

Sandihurst's Revival

Mid-Canterbury and the area around Christchurch holds a special place in the history of New Zealand wine. Vines were planted there as early as 1978 and the region quickly gained a reputation for steely Rieslings and intense Gewürztraminers. The phenomenal medal successes of the St Helena's Pinot Noir in 1982 and 1984 signalled the New Zealand potential for the variety.

But problems with wind and frost coupled with the successes of vineyards a little farther north in Waipara led to a decline in the number of producers within the vicinity of Christchurch and the overwhelming impact of the Marlborough brand also tended to attract any new investment money.

But there has been a renaissance of sorts in recent times. A number of the smaller wineries have found new owners and new visions to accompany them and one of those undergoing a resurrection is the West Melton winery of Sandihurst now under the ownership of Celia and Hennie Bosman. The winery has been upgraded and expanded and is already making an impression with a medal haul that includes golds for their Pinot Noir at the International Wine Challenge and at the Liquorland Top 100.

Usually, in order to make the leap into the wine business, you need tonnes of experience or large pockets and preferably both. But Celia and Hennie tell me that when they arrived in Christchurch from South Africa their pockets were certainly not bottomless and their experience in the wine industry very limited. "We had friends in South Africa with interests

in the wine industry in the Cape," says Celia. "But really our knowledge about how things worked or how the wines were made was minimal."

In fact when they met in Portugal Celia had a career as a professional ballet dancer and Hennie was with the South African Foreign Office. On settling back in South Africa, both pursued interests in the private sector – Celia with her own personal training business and Hennie in the IT sector.

But in 2004 the couple moved with their family of two boys, Nicholas and Sean to Christchurch to settle in what Hennie calls 'a country with no issues' and where their children could be raised and educated in comparative security.

"We had no firm plans," he says. "We just wanted time to look around and see what would suit us. One day we separately wrote a list of the things we would most like to do now that we were in a new country with new prospects of making a livelihood. 'Running a winery' was the top of both our lists. Problem solved you might think. But there was only one winery on the market at the time, finance was hard to organise because we had no credit record the banks could access and we were adamant that if we went into the business it had to be properly researched and planned. It was not just going to be the fulfilment of a romantic dream."

The Sandihurst winery at West Melton had only just come on the market following the death in 2003 of John Brough the founder and proprietor of many years. Celia and Hennie tasted the wines from 2004 that had been made by Kirk Bray who had



been employed by John just prior to his death and believed they and Kirk showed potential.

The site had been originally planted by John in 1988 and he had made his first wine in 1992. He had rapidly established a reputation for Sandihurst Gewürztraminer and was one of the early proponents of Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir. John had always maintained that the site had many similarities to the Alsace and that the aromatic varieties were best suited to the site.

Celia and Hennie concurred and after consulting local expertise in the form of Alan McCorkindale and Danny Schuster they established a business plan that involved not only retaining the services of Kirk but also re-defining the Sandihurst philosophy and re-developing the winery.

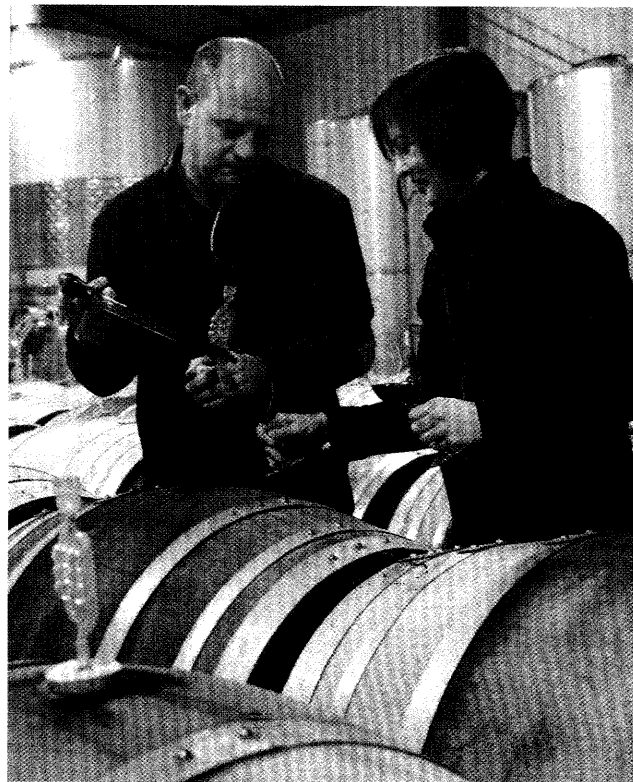
"In some ways our lack of experience at this stage was an advantage," says Hennie. "We refused to accept advice unless we could fully understand the underlying principles. We wanted clear answers and we insisted that viticultural and vinification strategies were fully explained to us. We did a lot of research, asked even more questions and went on a very steep learning curve. As a result we made some important decisions for Sandihurst's rejuvenation."

"We recognised that the business needed to expand to fulfil our aims but that first it had to be upgraded. We realised that with no frost protection on our own site and very little data to help us manage it we had to retain production from our own vineyard but also locate premium sites outside the district from which to source fruit. We were determined to keep the boutique feel of the brand but by launching wines from other definitive South Island regions we could keep that, spread our risks and take the winery and the brand forward."

Sandihurst now source Pinot Noir from Otago and Waipara as well as from the West Melton 12ha vineyard and they have retained the winery's reputation with an array of Rieslings and Gewürztraminers that have been very well received including some outstanding results in recent WineNZ tastings. The



A South African winter meal, potjiekos, in the winery.



Celia and Hennie Bosman.

wines from each region are vinified and branded separately and as a result Sandihurst offers three different Pinots, two different Rieslings as well as Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and a Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough. They are one of the few wineries in the country to have planted the Austrian variety Grüner Veltliner that is taking North America by storm. The first wines from this variety will be coming on stream in 2011.

"We are fully involved with the viticultural strategies in each of the vineyards from which we source fruit and the relationship with them is more collaborative than contractual. We are aiming for consistency at all costs."

One of the other decisions that Hennie and Celia made was to look to export sales before entering the local market and they already have markets in Hong Kong and Macau, UK and Ireland, Canada, USA and Singapore "It's an 'up the down staircase' scenario that has been very successful," says Hennie. "It has enabled us to get a secure foundation before concentrating on New Zealand sales."

Following their first vintage in 2006 production has expanded to 100 tonnes in contrast to the 1000 cases produced by John in his later years at Sandihurst. Hennie thinks that production in the new winery that was built in time for the 2007 vintage will reach 200 tonnes in a year or two and that a second label is due for release.

In the meantime the Sandihurst name lives on and Celia and Hennie have shown that careful research, clear thinking and an enormous amount of effort can not only create a viable business but can also fulfil a romantic dream or two.

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