

From tender pruning to old-fashioned gumbboot grape-stomping, these Wilsons Prom winemakers ensure their product is the real deal. Natalee Ward reports GRAEME Wilson's first day on his vineyard didn't quite go to plan. The former teacher had just realised a dream. He had bought a vineyard with stunning views, on rolling hills at Foster in South Gippsland overlooking Wilsons Promontory. "It's a steep, sloping place and I'd never driven a tractor before, but I hopped on and drove straight down one of the rows of vines," Graeme recalls. "Halfway down the first row I had to get off. I was so scared of the slope I thought, 'I just can't do this.' I didn't know what I was going to do."

That was 25 years ago and, since then, life for Graeme and his wife, Georgia, has been a slow but steady learning curve. The pair runs **Windy Ridge Winery**, a three-hectare vineyard, winery and cellar door producing pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, malbec and traminer.

The couple's business motto is "we grow it, we make it, we bottle it" and, apart from harvest, they run the entire show, year-round, on their own. Graeme and Minnesota-raised Georgia met when they were both teachers in Melbourne in the mid 1970s.

While teaching science, Graeme had studied winemaking at Dandenong TAFE and had made wine in his bathroom from boxes of market grapes. But in 1985, after teaching for nearly two decades, Graeme started studying viticulture by

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correspondence at what is now Charles Sturt University at Wagga Wagga in NSW. And at the same time he started to look for a property. Georgia, however, wasn't convinced. "We had just bought our dream house and I was happy, so I told him I would move to a vineyard as long as it was by the sea," she says. "I thought I had him snookered because I thought the only vineyards by the sea were on the Mornington Peninsula and I knew we couldn't afford the land down there."

But Graeme found a solution in a newspaper advertisement - a vineyard near Foster with sea views. Georgia, who has a pilot's licence, flew the couple down to Wilsons Prom. "From the air it looked fantastic, and then we drove down here and it was beautiful," she recalls.

At the end of 1985, Graeme quit teaching and they bought the property, put two caravans on it and lived there without power or running water for four months while their house was built. "They were pioneering days," Georgia says with a smile. The vineyard, planted in 1978, covered 6ha.

"We maintained the whole vineyard for a couple of years, but we quickly worked out we couldn't do it all on our own," Graeme says. "We either had to employ others to help us, which we really didn't want to do, or we had to cut back."

Graeme decided 3ha was about as much as he could prune on his own in winter, so the rows of riesling and chardonnay were removed.

Graeme made his first wine in 1988, but they didn't have enough wine to open the cellar door until 1995, a decade after Graeme's notorious tractor ride. The couple survived the early years on Georgia's teaching wage and Graeme's occasional emergency-teaching pay cheque. "We thought we would be quite rich within a couple of years, but it doesn't quite work that way," Graeme says.

These days, the vineyard and cellar door comfortably supports the couple. They do everything on the property themselves and rely on natural rainfall, an annual gamble despite being the most southerly located winery on mainland Australia.

"We don't irrigate, so each year our crop is a reflection of the rainfall," Graeme says. In 2004, for example, the pinot noir crop was five tonnes. In 2005, it was one tonne, thanks to the drought conditions that year. The past two years have seen them produce two tonnes of pinot.

"We produce anywhere between three and 10 tonnes of grapes in total," Graeme says. "In 1992 and '93 we didn't get a crop at all. But at any point in time on the bench in the cellar door we have two or three vintages for sale, so it evens out."

It's a labour-intensive business, but it's the way they like it. "Our philosophy is simple - we grow it, we make it, we bottle it," Graeme says. "It means that we know that the final product is exactly what we want it to be."

Winter is spent hand pruning the vines and bottling, corking and labelling wine that has been sitting in oak barrels for up to three years. Summer is hand-hedging time. Bird netting is placed on the vines in February.

Summer is also business time in the cellar door, which is open every weekend and every day during January. The Wilsons also sell wine at the Foster farmers' market and at the Tastes of Prom Country annual food and wine festival.

The only thing they don't do on their own is harvest. Each year, on one day in April and one day in May, an eager picking crew arrives, a team of about 25 volunteer friends, family and acquaintances who arrive to pick grapes and enjoy a shared lunch.

As the team picks, Graeme collects the grapes in his tractor and transports them to the winery where they are crushed within an hour of picking. The juice, skins and pulp are then placed into fermentation tanks. "A week later, I hop into the tanks with my sterile white gumbboots and bucket skins out into the hand basket press which we use to squeeze the last of

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the wine out."

The picking day ends with a fabulous dinner, which includes Georgia's famous slow-cooked roast lamb.

"Ninety per cent of my job I learnt on the job," Graeme says. "My training gave me the basic principles, then I worked out a method here and if it didn't work I would try something else. Now the two of us can do everything with very little machinery or equipment."

Georgia retired from teaching in 2006 and has forged her own path in the tourism industry. She is the deputy chairwoman for the Prom Country Regional Tourism executive and deputy chairwoman on Prom Coast Tourism, and has recently completed a Diploma of Tourism at Gippsland TAFE. The contacts she has made have been invaluable for the business, especially when it comes to surviving setbacks such as the Black Saturday fires last year.

Success has taken longer than expected, but Georgia and Graeme have the vineyard and the business running just as they like it.

"It hasn't been a perfect road, but I don't know if there was any other way we could do it, given the constraints we placed on ourselves," Graeme says. "We didn't want to borrow a great deal of money. We borrowed very little to buy the place, then we paid that off quickly and have stayed above the line ever since. We could have opened quicker if we wanted to borrow more, but we didn't."

"Sometimes I would love some help with the pruning, but I couldn't contemplate teaching someone how to prune a vine that I have pruned for the past 20 years."

"I want it done my way, and the only person who can do it my way is me."

The Lowdown

WINDY RIDGE WINERY

Graeme and Georgia Wilson run **Windy Ridge Winery**, a three-hectare vineyard on 17 hectares at Foster in South Gippsland, where they grow pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, malbec and traminer.

The couple's business motto is "we grow it, we make it, we bottle it" - Graeme studied viticulture and the couple take care of every job from pruning and winemaking to the cellar door.

The crop relies on natural rainfall and, as a result, each vintage differs in quantity, usually from three to 10 tonnes, creating between 2000 and 6000 bottles. They sell their wine for \$20-\$40 from the cellar door, via their web site and through restaurants and retail outlets. 527 Fish Creek-Foster Road, Foster.

Visit www.windyridgewinery.com.au or phone (03) 5682 2035

Keys to Success

In the early days, rather than borrow money for the business, they off-set their costs with off-farm teaching wages.

The grow only as many grapes as they can process on their own, keeping labour costs to a minimum.

They invite pickers each year, a tradition that sees volunteers from across Victoria return year after year to help pick the crop.

Want to know more?

Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE offers Certificate and Diploma courses in winemaking. It also offers Diploma subjects as individual short courses including Manage winegrape handling and fermentation, Managing the post-fermentation process; and Wine analysis procedures. Visit www.gotafe.vic.edu.au

HEDGING THEIR BETS

Each year, the vines at **Windy Ridge Winery** are hedged by hand.

In summer in most vineyards, the new shoots are lifted and tied above the vine. Leaves are then removed to let light through to the grapes.

At Windy Ridge, the new shoots spread outwards and by mid summer the vines meet mid-row. In order to drive down the rows, the vines are trimmed by hand with hedge trimmers. The physically demanding job to trim all the vines takes Graeme and Georgia (pictured) about a week and the process is done twice each summer. "It gives nice filtered light through the season, and we don't need to pluck leaves," Graeme says.

Caption: Wilson's way: Graeme and Georgia Wilson (inset, with their dog Kelly) and their vineyard at Foster in South Gippsland, overlooking Wilsons Prom.

Old hand: Graeme tackles steep rows of vines on the tractor and (below) the home-bottled and labelled wine.

Kelly the dog

Inspectors: Graeme checks his hand-trimmed vines (above), while Kelly (top) keeps a look out for cellar door guests.

Wine stain: Graeme and the once-white, sterile gumboots he wears in the fermentation tanks.

Georgia trimming the vines

Illus: Photo

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