

# Good things come from small vineyards

How does one of the smallest vineyards in Australia, with an annual production of 450 cases, crack the Chinese export market? Research on success in small business shows that while hard work and an outstanding product are essential, by far the most significant factor is a good measure of luck. The following success story, by Victoria Foster of Elysium Vineyard, includes all of these ingredients.

Victoria Foster

**I**N 1990 Elysium Vineyard, a one-hectare block of unirrigated Verdelho vines grown from rootstock from the original 1937 Tulloch vines, was planted by a group of my friends under the supervision of John Tulloch, who agreed to be our viticulture manager.

For eight vintages the wine was made at Tyrrells by Andrew Spinaze, the 2004 Australian Winemaker of the Year. This pedigree, combining perfect terroir for the variety, John Tulloch's expertise in viticulture and outstanding winemaking skills ensured the great quality of the wines, which were described in 2001 as 'consistently successful' by Huon Hooke.

Toni Paterson MW reviewed the 2003 vintage made by Nick Paterson (no relation) who trained at Tyrrells and is currently a finalist in the 2004 Australian Young Winemaker of the Year Awards. He said: 'The vigneron at Elysium Vineyard in the Hunter Valley has every right to be proud of her new vintage Verdelho. It is a fresh and vibrant wine, with none of the dreaded coarseness or alcoholic hotness that can so often spoil this variety. The nose, with its tones of lemon zest and fresh apple, is inviting. And the palate, which is both structured and balanced, tastes of fresh fruit salad. There is a hint of grassiness, which improves rather than detracts from the wine and the finish is crisp and clean. A classy partner to a long, lazy lunch, though perfectly delightful served alone.' And James Halliday gave the gold medal winning 1999 vintage 4.5 stars in his 2005 *Wine Companion*.

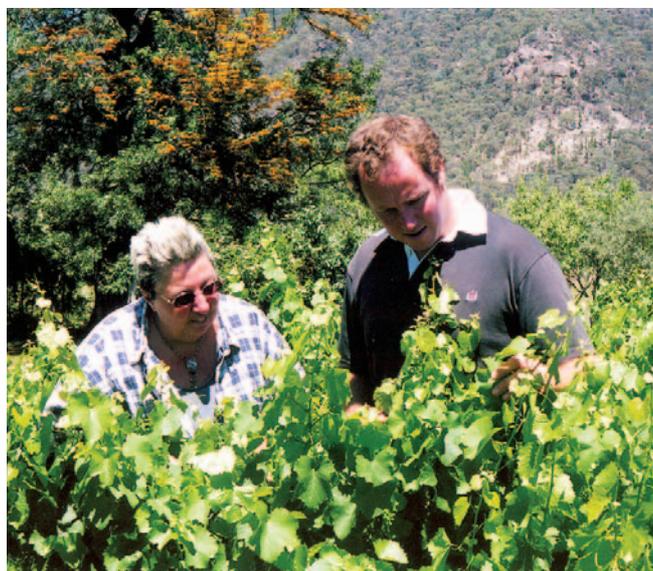
Elysium Vineyard is the only winery in Australia specialising in premium, unirrigated, aged Verdelho: something very special! The quality of the wine has meant that every vintage has been accepted for inclusion on top wine lists in the domestic market, such as Quay (2004 NSW Restaurant of the Year) and Wildfire in Sydney, the Old George and Dragon, Roberts and Peppers in the Hunter Valley, and the Ginger Room in Old Parliament House, Canberra. However, the export market seemed quite another challenge.

Luck intervened in September 2002 when I received an email from the general manager of a new upmarket restaurant complex in Shanghai, seeking accommodation for 10 days at Elysium Vineyard Cottage, as a base for a Hunter Valley wine buying exercise. I offered to arrange his wine tour and accompany him.

Recently I asked him what had originally attracted him to Elysium. He replied: 'What attracted me was the wonderful



Victoria Foster with business partner Ben Moechtar, who is vice president of the Australian Sommeliers Association.



Victoria Foster with winemaker Nick Paterson.

location which you have and the beautiful house. A perfect getaway for the family ... your 2000 vintage was simply piled up in the porch and my wife and I shared a bottle with you in the late afternoon sun overlooking the vineyard. I had never tasted this grape in an Oz wine before and was immediately taken by its unique character and style. It works equally well with or without food, has balance and good depth, long legs and an impressive colour. Wish there was more like it.'

Nevertheless, he left without ordering. Imagine my surprise



Victoria Foster with Peter Bell, chief sommelier of Quay restaurant in Sydney.

when, nearly nine months later, I received an email expressing interest in the new 2003 vintage. Now the fun really started!

**THE EXPORT PROCESS**

This began with my sending two samples and a laboratory analysis to China. I was warned by the importing company that the Chinese administrative procedures would be tortuous. However, this was nothing on the Australian procedures! Having to deal with several different authorities would be made a lot easier for novices if someone were to produce a step-by-step guide. And it would be more pleasant if some of our local personnel realised that export is a good thing for Australia, and that it would be a good idea to assist, not hinder, fledgling exporters.

Finally, several months after the process began, I watched with enormous joy as 30 cases of 2003, and 10 cases of 2000,



Victoria Foster with the 1999 Elysium Verdelho.

left the vineyard for China. Oddly, the easiest part was settling on a price, which was somewhat better than cellar door or wholesale prices, with payment terms of 120 days. The various costs of the export process were around \$1,000. The second order for a further 40 cases came quite suddenly early this year. By now I was an expert in the process!

**RELATIONSHIP WITH THE IMPORTER AND RESTAURANT PERSONNEL**

Both the importing company in China and my contacts at the restaurant could not have been more pleasant to deal with. I have maintained regular contact with the executive chef who is also the sommelier. In my research for this article, he has been very generous in giving me some fascinating insights into the reception of the wine in the Shanghai market.

‘Your wine has been received extremely well,’ he said. ‘It is particularly challenging to sell white wines to Chinese consumers, however they love yours. They love the fact we went to such efforts to get interesting wines on our list’. Regarding whether Verdelho has a special appeal in China, he replied, ‘It is an interesting grape and the local consumers are always interested in something a bit more unique. For most of them it is the first time they have heard of it’.

My Chinese friend said the wine was mostly consumed by experts and locals. ‘I have not observed much from the tourist trade,’ he said. ‘Although it is always good with the Australians. It was recently chosen by one of our best clients for a very high profile power dinner involving both western and Chinese people’.

On Chinese attitudes to wine, he said: ‘Chinese love wine, they are also becoming more aware every day of variations. The Hong Kong Chinese and other expat Chinese are very knowledgeable on wine and many of the affluent ones have cellars that would rival the best’.

And the price point? ‘Due to the fact we have to transport and go through all the trouble to get it here, we are charging a bit more than I imagine it would go for in the Hunter,’ he said. ‘We are also an upmarket restaurant. We are charging \$US150.’

Will this export relationship continue and, if so, which vintages are preferred? ‘Yes, we do anticipate stocking it in the future,’ he said. ‘We have now registered it in China and it would make sense to carry on. All years sound great if the current success of the wine continues’. And a final comment from the sommelier on the export/import process: ‘It is long, painful and expensive to get wines registered and imported but worth the effort’. I couldn’t agree more! And a wonderfully creative experience for the ultimate boutique vigneron.

A very happy postscript to this story is that at the time of writing, I have just secured a deal to export to the North American markets of Canada and New York where there is great interest in premium aged Verdelho.

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