

BLOOD TIES IN THE VINES

by James Atkinson

Selector Magazine



Understanding what it means to work in a family business is very difficult without having experienced it first-hand.

Average tenure in a job these days is about three years. But working in a family business could be for life, and it brings to bear many other pressures and considerations.

"We really understand that we're not here for a short time," says Katherine Brown, a fourth generation winemaker at Brown Brothers and part of Australia's First Families of Wine.

"When you're working in a family business, you're not striving for your own career. You're striving for the whole entire business, for a brand that usually has your name in it.

"Every vintage means so much to you because it's another page in the history books, rather than just another product to get on the shelf."

Angela Miranda of Lou Miranda Estate likely has more perspective on this than most. In February this year she returned to the family wine business after 14 years with Pernod Ricard Winemakers, the monolith behind Jacob's Creek, G.H. Mumm Champagne and myriad other brands.

"It's very different. Coming back here,

I'm doing it for myself and the family," she says. "The volumes are small, but I'm involved with everything from grape to bottle. In larger companies, you usually don't get to see quite as much.

"I'm not used to doing interviews, either! I'm usually behind the scenes."

Much of Angela's time at Pernod was spent travelling to emerging wineries in China, India and New Zealand. Prior to that, she worked in the company's North American and British divisions, and she has done vintages in Italy and South Africa.

Today, overseas experience is a rite of passage for any winemaker seeking to carry on the family tradition.

"The greatest thing Dad always said was, 'go and learn in other people's wineries in a different style and technique and then you'll be more prepared when you come home',"

says Ben Portet, of Dominique Portet in the Yarra Valley.

"So for five or six years I travelled the world and worked in different countries and different wineries and it just gave me a lot more insight. Make mistakes in other people's wineries first, I think that's the most important part!"

Armed with his global experience, Ben convinced the family to invest heavily in cutting edge equipment on his return.

"Dad never once resisted, he's always been a bit of a trailblazer in terms of technology," he says. "So in 2012, we put in a state-of-the-art sorting machine that allows us to sort each bunch, berry by berry, and that's had a huge impact. We've been able to get a lot more purity and balance in the wines, and a level of detail that we couldn't get without it."



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GENERATION NEXT

Ben Portet's immersion in the wine industry began at an early age, though he says father Dominique never pushed him to follow in his footsteps.

"We all fell in love with wine anyway. I

was on the bottling line at age 14 and as we progressed through school, the weekends and the holidays would be spent in the vineyard," he says.

It looks as though the die may already be cast for his two young sons, aged five and two.

"We let them smell a glass of wine and try to guess what variety it is," he says. "The five-year-old is a bit confused between Chardonnay and Cabernet at the moment, so we're just trying to focus him on the colour."



The next generation is front of mind at Crittenden Wines on the Mornington Peninsula, too.

Named the 2010 Australian Young Gun of Wine, Rollo Crittenden has taken the baton from his father Garry, a true pioneer of the region.

"I have two boys and my sister has two children as well, a boy and a girl," says Rollo. "That helps us to have a fairly long-term view of the business and the importance of sustainability, because we're not just doing it for us, we're doing it for

future generations – if they want to be involved."

The multi-generational perspective drove Crittenden Wines' investment in improving the soil health in its estate vineyard, planted in 1982, which remains its primary fruit source.

And Rollo believes their family dynamic has played an integral role in defining the company culture.

"Between my sister Zoe, myself and my parents, I think that the energy

you put into a family business is infectious to the other staff," he says. "I think they feel like they're part of something, not a faceless corporate beast.

"A lot of our employees have families. We're very sympathetic to the needs of families, and I think that has given us a great culture. We're lucky that we have a very engaged, very driven team, and I think that it gives everyone the opportunity to be a part of something that they're invested in."

A TO Z OF FAMILY

In the Barossa, Janelle and Kristen Zerk are continuing their family's winemaking tradition, while treading their own path.

"Our heritage dates back six generations in grape growing and winemaking in the Barossa Valley," says Janelle. We grew up on the Zerk vineyard that has been in our family over 170 years."

The Zerks were among the earliest German settlers in the Barossa Valley, originally putting down roots in Hoffnungsthal, which adjoins the family property.

"Kristen and I put ourselves through university and worked for many other companies large and small, before deciding that we could do it for ourselves," says Janelle.

While there are several generations of grape growers and winemakers on both sides of their family, Janelle and Kristen went it alone, founding Z Wine in 1999.

"We continue to purchase a small amount of fruit from the family vineyard, but we work with 10 other grape growers across the Barossa and Eden Valleys," says Janelle. "I feel that it would be extremely special if one of the next generation takes over the winemaking, but not essential."

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The Crittenden clan

