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COMMODITIES

Star Lane winery at Beechworth 5-star rating in James Halliday Wine Companion 2015

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Gum barrel straight: Brett and Liz Barnes from Star Lane Winery are ageing wine in red gum instead of oak. Picture: Andy Rogers

- FIONA MYERS
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WHEN a winery is only selling a limited number of cases a year, everything about those wines needs to be right.

It is this attention to detail, combined with a passion to be part of the wine industry, that has seen one Beechworth couple make great gains in a depressed market

Brett and Liz Barnes have been considered and careful in their progression in the wine industry.

They have made sure each step they have taken is the right one before moving ahead.

It's a clear lesson in how to make a business work, built on objective but innovative decision making.

The results of their hard work have seen their Star Lane winery at Beechworth given a lauded five-star rating in the James Halliday *Wine Companion 2015*.

That's nothing to sneeze at given the Barnes only planted their vines in 1997 and started their winery in 2005.

GO FOR GROWTH

THE couple's progression from grape grower to wine maker was planned.

"We knew we could not make a living out of 6ha of grapes but we wanted to have more mature vines when we started making wines ourselves," Brett said.

"It is why we chose to sell our grapes to others and to help establish the best ways of growing grapes and allow the vines to mature before we attempted to make our own wine."

Neither Brett or Liz had any experience in the wine industry but that did not deter them.

Brett went to an agricultural institute to prepare him for the viticultural role managing the quality of the grapes in the vineyard, while Liz studied at university to become the winery's winemaker.

Brett said the key to a quality wine was the quality of grapes.

The main site they selected to grow their grapes is where the winery is, and the vines were planted on red loam soils.

They planted merlot and shiraz on this block, but selected sangiovese and nebbiolo for their other planting, on nearby land owned by Rex and Kate Lucas,

Despite being just a few kilometres away, the second block has granite soils suited to the other varieties.



Fine vines: Brett and Liz Barnes (pictured with sons Ryan and Josh), from Star Lane Winery, are ageing wine in red gum instead of oak, they are the first in the world to do this. Picture: Andy Rogers

Winery shoots for the Star

GRAPE APPROACH

BRETT is painstaking about the way the grapes are managed, and aims for a yield of just 4.4 tonnes a hectare.

That ensures the highest quality wine grapes to make wine.

And that is not as easy as it seems, despite the relatively difficult growing conditions in the Beechworth area.

“We cannot over fertilise and we cannot over water,” Brett said.

“It is about giving enough — but not too much — to our vines to make sure the fruit size is right.”

To make a high-quality wine, the grapes ideally need to be not much bigger than a pea.

Too much water or too much nitrogen can mean the grape size can become too big, and the ratio of skins to juice is not right.

The Barnes soil test each year to ensure the grapes have just enough nitrogen, and do leaf analysis halfway through the season to check the nitrogen levels.

They also hand prune and leaf pick so the canopy is big enough to stop the fruit becoming sunburnt but not so thick that it does not mature.

The grapes are also trellised using a VSP system, which allows sunlight to enter the canopy and is considered an ideal way to grow low yielding vines.

HIGH AND MIGHTY

THE vineyards are 450m above sea level and while it produces almost a cold climate variety, the flip side can be increased risk of frost damage.

And when you are growing a small amount of high-quality fruit, a frost at the wrong time could spell disaster.

It's why the Barnes decided from the start to install a system from Israel, with fine sprays mounted on each post in the vineyard.

"The sprinklers put out a fine mist and it was the most effective way of frost control in our undulating country," Brett said.

"Wind machines wouldn't have been any good because we have too many inversion layers, but these sprinklers form an ice cocoon around the bunches and so the grapes are not damaged because they don't get below 0C.

"You have to be able to work with the weather and find ways to work with it and that's why we accepted the frost risk from the start and made plans."

Water for the supplementary irrigation of the vineyard, and the frost control, is provided by a rain-fed dam. Once the vines matured, it was time to start the winery that was completed in 2005. Since then, the Barnes have been selling a limited number of wines made in the French tradition, aiming for the top end of the market.

BOTTLE OH

THE wines retail for \$30-\$55 and are sold through restaurants as well as export destinations like Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

They hope their latest venture — to mature wine in red-gum barrels made for the winery — will expose them to an even broader audience.

The red-gum project, like all the things the Barnes tackle, has been carefully planned.

"We knew that red gum would be able to be bent as many of the old paddle-steamers on the rivers were made from red gum," Brett said.

“We also liked the idea of using red gum and given that Liz’s family has four generations involved in the red gum industry, it was even more attractive.”

It took 10 years to develop the barrels and work out exactly how to mature the wines in something which is completely left field for the industry.

The Barnes have just released their first limited edition of Elements Shiraz 2012 aged in a red-gum timber barrel, with just 300 bottles being offered at \$400 each.

But Brett is hopeful it might be the start of things to come, and given heavy interest already from China, the signs are good.

He even sees that he might be able to manufacture red gum barrels for other wineries that are keen to try something different.

He is also looking at other Australian hardwoods for other possibilities.

Brett has some advice for those who might want to tackle a similar project, in the wine industry or something else.

“Do one thing and make sure you have that 110 per cent perfect before you tackle the next big project,” he said.