



# Winemaker I am

WHEN SAMANTHA CONNEW DECIDED TO TAKE A JOB IN A CHRISTCHURCH WINE BAR SHE DIDN'T ENVISAGE SHE WOULD END UP ACCEPTING A WINEMAKER AWARD IN LONDON.

Words **Jackie Macdonald**

In 2007, Samantha Connew, senior winemaker at McLaren Vale's Wirra Wirra, was named International Red Winemaker of the Year. However, she almost missed out on the ceremony to pick up the gong. True to her winemaking spirit, Sam was committed to completing a vintage and had to be coaxed over to London for the awards.

In the end, she is grateful she made the trip. The incredibly prestigious ceremony is likened to the 'Oscars' of wine and only a handful of Australians have ever won the award.

In comparing Sam's success to that of her peers, she sticks out as a female in a male dominated industry. However, to Sam, her gender has little significance, but she is quick to point out her nationality (especially considering the well-worn practice of Australians 'adopting' kiwis when they do something of global significance).

“I think the fact that I’m a New Zealander has more importance in what I do than being female,” she says. “I get a bit annoyed when people ask what it’s like being a female winemaker. I mean, do you ask guys what it’s like being a male winemaker? I think that kind of thing is no longer an issue.”

The fact is, however, it was not until 1973 that the first female graduated from the Oenology course at Roseworthy College, 37 years after its establishment. As late as 1992 there were only two female wine show judges in Australia, it was not until 1999 that a

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woman won the prestigious Jimmy Watson Trophy and of Australia’s 15 Masters of Wine, only one is a woman.

Admittedly, emphasising achievement based on gender can sometimes exacerbate the divide. However, the fact that women in wine are still achieving firsts highlights the need for ongoing recognition. Women like Sam Connew are still breaking down the barriers, creating equality in the male dominated wine world.

So a year on from the big award, we thought it opportune to catch up with Sam and find out how a former Kiwi law student has become one of Australia’s brightest young winemaking stars.

As is often the case in life, Sam’s eventual choice of career was not her first. By the second year of her law degree Sam knew the subject was too dry to hold, for her, any lasting interest. At this time she was working in a Christchurch wine bar where her manager was a winemaker.

“When the wine bar first started it was pretty revolutionary because they had over 70 wines by the glass. It was all of the boutique stuff and the winemakers would do all their own deliveries.”

This experience gave her a taste for all things vinous and this interest was strengthened through restaurant work in Adelaide’s Red Ochre and Botanic Gardens restaurants in 1995. Unfortunately, her Australian travels were cut short in ‘96 by her mother’s illness.

However, the return to New Zealand saw a return to study but of a different kind. A friend convinced her to do the Graduate Diploma in Viticulture and Oenology at Lincoln University and her future was decided. “As soon as I started the course I knew that that was absolutely what I wanted to do; it was just being in the right place at the right time.”

When it came to doing her first vintage in ‘99, chance again played a role. While she was working at another wine bar she met the owners of a vineyard in Oregon, USA. After working out that Sam was quite knowledgeable about wine they offered her a job.

This was followed by vintages in Margaret River, Sicily and the Hunter Valley. Her Hunter vintage was at Brokenwood under the legendary Iain Riggs.



Above Woodhenge.  
Right Two of Wirra  
Wirra’s best known drops  
- the Angelus Cabernet  
Sauvignon and Church  
Block Cabernet Sauvignon  
Merlot.

This, she describes, was “the turning point experience.” Riggs had an influence she’ll never forget. “I think the difference was Riggsy, and I’m sure there are a lot of ex-Brokenwood people who would have the same story. He very much treats you as an equal and when you’re a recent grad, that’s amazing. He encouraged me to look at wines, give my opinion and talk freely about them, which was extraordinary.”

The admiration is mutual; Riggs has high praise for her ambitious determination. “The girl has tenacity. It is changing but the wine industry is still a ‘blokey’ work scene with quite a bit of physical labour required. Sam has stuck at it and succeeded.”

Such was the impact Sam made, Riggs had no hesitation in recommending her for an assistant winemaker role at McLaren Vale’s Wirra Wirra.

By 2001, Sam was senior winemaker.

It takes a special type of person to work at Wirra Wirra (an Aboriginal term meaning ‘amongst the gums’) with its long history of eccentricity. Its founder was Robert Strangways Wigley, whose family banished him to the countryside, i.e. McLaren Vale, following a series of embarrassing pranks. These included joy-riding in a pie cart down King William Street and riding a horse through the Adelaide Town Hall.

On arrival in McLaren Vale he turned his hand to viticulture and by 1901 was the proud owner of a successful winery and 100 acres of vineyards.

Following Wigley's death in 1924 his property fell into disrepair and it wasn't until late 1969 that it was bought and subsequently revived by cousins Roger and Greg Trott. As industrious as their predecessor, these men set about collecting the necessities of their first vintage. Then, as described in the Wirra Wirra history, "armed with an ancient wooden Bagshaw crusher, a pump and an old French press, they made their first wine in the open air amidst the ruins."

It was Greg Trott's vision that became the Wirra Wirra of today. He based the design of the winery on pencil sketches taken from rare old photographs of the original site. To the impressive Ironstone

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Cellars, Trott added several unique touches. There's the 3½ tonne Angelus Bell, which originally belonged to a Jesuit Church in the South Australian town of Norwood, and is now used to announce the start and finish of each vintage. Then there's the 10 tonne wooden fence that's known as 'Woodhenge' for the fact that it's made from enormous red gums.

So does Sam fit the Wirra Wirra tradition of eccentricity? In a way, she feels she does, "I think eccentricity is one of those wonderfully British terms that captures people who are slightly mad and it would definitely fit me. But it's slightly mad but incredibly passionate as well and I'm certainly passionate about what I do."

Sam Connew regards her time working with Greg Trott as a great privilege and has taken important lessons from his influence. "Trott was obviously an amazing eccentric, incredibly frustrating on a number of different levels; completely unable to reach decisions in a short space of time but an extraordinary man in terms of sheer warmth of personality and generosity. He was always incredibly supportive and encouraging, not just of myself but anyone, particularly younger people."

So the combined influence of Iain Riggs and Greg Trott has resulted in Sam's endeavour to develop a strong team that shares her great passion for wine.

According to Wirra Wirra's Managing Director, Andrew Kay, Sam "has brought a level of discipline and professionalism to the cellar, while at the same time understanding that we are in this business because we all love wine. She leads by example in terms of attention to detail and setting standards. She sets high expectations of herself and encourages others to aspire to the same."

When Sam became senior winemaker she described it as a chance to "put my own stamp on an iconic Australian wine brand."

This, explains Kay, is something she's certainly achieved. "When you taste through our entire portfolio, the most striking thing is the purity of expression of the varietal and approachability of the wines. With our reds, it is often commented upon as to the soft, silky tannins that have become a bit of a trademark for Sam."

Continuing the praise, wine writer Campbell Mattinson wrote of her, "I expect she's incapable of making an ordinary wine."

For many, especially in an industry that's so prone to the vagaries of vintage, the pressure of such acclaim would take its toll. Not so for Sam, who humbly attributes her success to the whole Wirra Wirra team.

"I don't feel any increased pressure because I think we've always had high expectations of ourselves. All the accolades, the plaudits and the trophies, they're cherries on the cake, they're bonuses. When we do get them it's fantastic but it's more us knowing that we're actually achieving our targets."

In terms of attracting awards Sam is also very conscious of Wirra Wirra's loyal fans. One of their most popular wines, Church Block, is designed for immediate drinking and tailoring it to the wine show system would mean a drastic change in style. As she explains, "I'm a big supporter of the wine show system but if we really wanted to load it up with more oak and more concentrated fruit I'm sure we'd do well, but that's not necessarily what the public wants to drink. It has to have a subtleness to it that makes it presentable right from the get-go."

Like many winemakers, Sam has a great love of food. "I'm madly into food, I love cooking, it's one of the things that I do to switch off and I love cooking for other people, having dinner parties and friends round for lunch. Sounds like a casual interest, but Andrew Kay sheds a more serious light on the subject, "Sam is known to be just marginally less obsessive about food than she is about wine." The result is that, as Kay describes, "she definitely creates wines with an eye to how they will complement food."

As I write this, Sam has just been announced as a finalist in the Telstra Business Woman of the Year awards; another feather in her ever-expanding winemaking cap. And this time, she has her seat booked at the awards ceremony.

There is no doubt that Sam Connew is an inspirational role model for the next generation of winemakers certainly, and also anyone who dreams of turning a passion into a living. ■