

# The Advertiser

FOOD & WINE, DRINKS, TIM LLOYD, October 31st 2007

WIRRA WIRRA

## STILL ON THE TROTT

**A SOUTHERN treasure continues to kick goals, true to the big-picture personality of its creator.**



Greg Trott's headstone is newly installed at his serene country gravesite at the top of Strout Rd, McLaren Vale. His beloved Wirra Wirra winery is straight down the road and many hundreds of people, me included, remember that processional walk to the cemetery after his funeral service at the winery in March, 2005.

The headstone, erected two weeks ago, carries the quotation "A life lived to the lees", which nicely sums up an entertaining man who developed a remarkable winery.

Wirra Wirra was built around a bigger-than-life personality and many wondered what would happen to it after his death. His daughters, Catherine and Emily, are major shareholders, not winemakers.

The resounding answer was delivered last month, when Wirra Wirra was announced Red Winemaker of the Year at the 2007 International Wine Challenge Awards Dinner in London. That is about as big as it gets for international recognition for a winery.

Before the awards in September, Wirra's senior winemaker, Samantha Connew, was doing the "flying winemaker" thing near Madrid, in Spain.

Connew is a young New Zealander who has adopted Wirra Wirra and Willunga as her home after spending eight years working under Greg Trott and senior winemaker Tim James. She took on the senior winemaking role after James's retirement and elevation to the board.

Flying winemakers like Connew have been able to choose to work on two vintages a year and broaden their knowledge of international wines in both southern and northern hemispheres.

As well as introducing the Spanish to a few New World winemaking techniques, Connew was investigating what she sees as the exciting potential for Spanish varieties in Australia. She was working at the Compania de Vinos de Telmo Rodriguez, which makes wines in eight regions in Spain, giving her a dress-circle seat in the assessment and understanding of Spanish varieties.

She has been paying close attention to white varieties like verdejo, the newly rediscovered variety of Rueda, where Rodriguez is based. This year, she was particularly taken by the albarino and godello white varieties from the rugged vineyards of Galicia on Spain's Atlantic north coast.

She took 24 hours out, boarded a plane to London and was inducted into the glitz and glamour of the International Wine Challenge and the English wine scene which, because of the

embryonic condition of its own wine industry, is mostly about the world's wines and their sales and marketing.

In all, 9385 wines had been judged for the awards, and Wirra Wirra's 2004 Dead Ringer Cabernet Sauvignon won three trophies, including Best International Cabernet Sauvignon.

The wine's name is causing some confusion, because it is better known in Australia as Angelus, after Greg Trott's vintage bell. A winery in St Emilion in France objected to the similarity of its name. It sells for \$60 at cellar door. Connew is particularly delighted that it was the cabernet sauvignon wine that gained all the attention.

"It's one of the nice things in McLaren Vale over the past few years," she says. "It's at the forefront with cabernet, with Chapel Hill, Scarpantoni, Serafina, Geoff Merrill and Shingleback all winning recognition for their cabernets.

"It's awesome to see this region get all these gongs for cabernet," says Connew. "It's always been shiraz and McLaren Vale. We are saying, 'No, we make cabernet too'. I don't think it's too far away before cabernet is treated like shiraz here."

Connew describes her Angelus as a mixture of cabernets from three subregions of the district; Wirra Wirra's own Stubby Rise vineyard, a vineyard in the Seaview subregion and another from the foothills subregion at the base of the Willunga Hills escarpment. Each subregion produces a distinctively different cabernet sauvignon, and Connew's job, along with her winemaker, Alexia Roberts, is to follow through batches before blending the final wine.

"Cabernet is so much more demanding from the style perspective than shiraz," she says. "One of the reasons shiraz has been so successful in Australia is that it is a kind of all-encompassing animal, and there are so many styles it's hard to pick which avenue to go down.

"Cabernet is much more of an intellectual wine altogether. I can't stand cabernets that look like shiraz. Cabernet needs to be like cabernet but at the same time it shouldn't be green or leafy, so it is much harder from that perspective to actually nail it.

"I think cabernet is all about structure, and that's what we focus on in Angelus. It's almost like railway tracks through the middle of the palate. It has that linear structure that carries on and there is nothing that sticks out from the railway tracks."

Connew says she plans to remain at Wirra Wirra for the foreseeable future, so expect more cabernet action, along with those Spanish newcomers.

Wirra Wirra experiments with its new varieties by putting out limited releases at cellar door only, so that's the place to find out more.

Above Left: Flying Winemaker... Wirra Wirra's Samantha Connew. Picture by: Grant Nowell