

OPERATOR SUCCESS STORY

MAVERICK BY NAME, MAVERICK BY MOTHER NATURE

A photograph of two men in a vineyard. The man on the left has a grey beard and is wearing a dark t-shirt and blue shorts. The man on the right has grey hair and is wearing a dark jacket and blue shorts. They are both looking at a bunch of grapes hanging from a vine. The background shows a vast vineyard under a cloudy sky.

LIFELONG BIODYNAMIC FARMER AND VITICULTURIST, RON BROWN, IS BREAKING THE MOULD AND PUTTING PREMIUM ORGANIC WINES FROM THE BAROSSA VALLEY ON THE TABLES OF THE FINEST RESTAURANTS AROUND THE WORLD.

ORGANIC INSIGHTS

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MAVERICK WINES:

PUTTING AUSTRALIAN PREMIUM ORGANIC
AND BIODYNAMIC WINES ON THE TABLE IN
THE WORLD'S FINEST RESTAURANTS

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PLUS MUCH MORE...

"WE DO THINGS A BIT DIFFERENTLY AROUND HERE. WE DON'T DO THINGS IN THE NORMAL METHOD - WE'RE VERY MAVERICK," SAID RON BROWN, FOUNDER OF RENOWNED NCO CERTIFIED ORGANIC AND BIODYNAMIC VINEYARD, MAVERICK WINES IN THE BAROSSA VALLEY, SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

Brown's Tall Hill Road Vineyard, is perched above the valley 400 metres above sea level. It was originally part of the old Pevsey Vale Station, which remains the oldest cool climate vineyard in Australia.

"We're only a small winery producing around 100 tonnes per year but we like to think we're making a big impact in our own small way," Brown said with a grin.

"Although we generally have much lower yields than our neighbours because of the older vines and the organic farming practices, but in turn, there is an intensity and purity to the wine."

Brown is on the tall end of a long vintage. He looks a little weary but happy as he soaks up his young son, and with wife, Mollie's head out through the front gate that separates the house from the vineyard to check the vines again.

It's been and he's only had about three hours sleep. He has just returned from his winery/tasting club about 20 minutes away with the latest must but of precious Grenache grapes grown on the side of a sun-soaked western slope in Eden Valley.

"I came to Australia in 1987 and cut my teeth at Charles Sturt University learning how the Australians made wine," he said. "During that time I visited all the wine growing regions of Australia and I just decided the Barossa was for me."

It's not difficult to see why Brown fell in love with the region. Standing at the top of the vines the view from his vineyard is picture-postcard.

"We have the Barossa Valley over there," Brown says pointing to the next, green plots below. "It's about 200 ft, lower than where we're standing here at Tall Hill. And it's 'low rasser' - it's hot, it's flat and it's famous for making Shiraz and Grenache."

"But up here in Eden Valley, we've got a different climate," Brown explains. "It's much more exposed and we get quite a bit more rain and wind and of course the soils are very different which gives you a unique soil profile or palate to play with when it comes to making wine."

So having settled on the Barossa Valley after working in Europe and Asia, how did the organic winery come to fruition?

"When Tall Hill became available on the market some years ago I snatched it up," Brown said. "For me it was screaming lots of what we call in Europe, terroir."

"We have Shiraz over there, Riesling on the hill, Goscado here and we vinify each block separately," Brown said.

"We have very small fermenters and the whole thing is really aimed at expressing the soils, the climate, what lies beneath - that for me is the job of a vigneron."

While the development of the Barossa Valley dates back to the first German settlers in South Australia in the mid 1800s, Brown is quick to acknowledge the land has a deep, sacred connection to the original inhabitants.

"This is a very spiritual place here," he said. "Every year, before we start the harvest, we have an indigenous ceremony and play bonfire and tribute to the ancestor's spirits who you can feel very strongly still live here."

Brown is passionate about organic and biodynamic viticulture and is inspired, rather than daunted, by the challenges this kind of farming system presents.

"For me, organic and biodynamic farming is not about what you do - it's about what you don't do," he said.

"We could go the whole hog and do follow-tilling days but the single most important thing about organic and biodynamic farming is not having pesticides and fungicides in the vineyard. That is 99% of the story."

"If you taste the resulting wines, you'll see right through a thread of purity which comes from not having chemicals in the soil. It comes through the vine, into the grape, into the wine," he said.

Like most organic producers, weed management is an ongoing balancing act demanding creative but practical solutions.

"I think the fact that we don't use any sort of weed killer is of course our biggest challenge," Brown said. "Because everybody has weeds."

"You can see from this vineyard, we bring the sheep in from straight after harvest, usually the beginning of May, and just before bud-burst. They do a fantastic job and we give ourselves an over-weed-eating rather than weed-killing."

"If you taste the resulting wines, you'll see right through a thread of purity which comes from not having chemicals in the soil. It comes through the vine, into the grape, into the wine."

ABOUT SKELETAL SOILS

Skeletal soils occupy narrow ridges and steep slopes. They are related to entisols, more fully developed soils in the catenas, but are shallower and stonier, consisting of partially weathered coarse rock fragments, with some organic matter.

"TERROR"

Understanding the concept of "terroir" is fundamental to Mavorola's plans to create site specific wines. Terroir is a French term meaning total elements of the vineyard.

Specific elements that contribute to a grape's composition and resultant wine style include:

- Soil
- Altitude and its effect on temperature and climate in general
- Temperature
- Rainfall
- Relative Humidity
- Sunshine hours
- Wind
- Aspect
- Vineyard management
- Vine age
- Vine store

Brown pointed to a row of vines where the overcast/low weathes couldn't resist a nibble on the grapes.

"Unfortunately they like to eat the same things that we like," Brown said. "So once the sheep have been taken out, we are more or less at Nature's mercy." The climatological organic property is inevitably a little more unruly than the more manicured, traditional operations and Tiel Hill Vineyard is no exception.

"This is a typical organically/dynamic vineyard," Brown said with a laugh. "Yes, you can still see weeds but there is also this great abundance."

He leans closer to carefully inspect the gnarly trunk of an older Grenache vine. "This vine is an older one, and you can see it has a well-developed root system," he explains. "If you firm the soil, you actually stress the vine and you force it to push its roots farther down."

"If you imagine a developed vine system of five metres long by three metres deep, if we can force the roots to go down just one more centimetre... that is one more centimetre of water, nutrients and nitrogen that for 100 years, those vines have not been able to find."

"It's not so much a management plan as a result."

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"Again, that's one of the real aspects of the way we farm," Brown said. "It's not so much a management plan as a result."

"We force the costs to go deeper, we force the needs to look for alternative sources of nutrient other than what could be chemically delivered on a plate to them. And you can see the yields are fantastic, and there's no disease."

So to summarize Brown's organic and biodynamic farm management practices:

"We do as little as we can conceivably do to impact on nature's cycle. That's what we're all about. I know it runs very contrary to what's practiced by most commercial wineries and there is nothing wrong with those wineries. But for me, wine is a product of nature and I have had the good fortune to be involved with it all of my life."

MARKETING ORGANIC AND BIODYNAMIC WINES

Brown's expertise is not just in the vineyard but also in the all-important marketing of his products.

"If you take the China market," he said, "it's very important for everyone here in the Valley and across Australia."

"We sell less than 1000 cases into China ever year however, of the top 10 distributors there is only one which is Chinese owned and a distributor for Maverick Wines."

So we focus on the top premiere markets—hotels, restaurants, specialist liquor stores where people go to get different, exciting, interesting wine offerings.

So exclusivity is at the core of the brand?

"Well, you won't see us everywhere where Australian wines are sold. That's our strategy and it's not because we're trying to be snobby."

"We have a very small production so we want our wines to be exposed in the right way to the right people," Brown said. The export market has proved to be highly successful for Maverick Wines in recent years but it has taken time and a considerable investment in planning and relationship.

"We've been particularly successful in France—the Plassing from the Hill has been sold by the glass in three of the Michelin Star restaurants in Paris," Brown said. "As an Australian organic vigneron, that is a source of immense and delight our little Plassing from the Hill vigneron is three of the world's top restaurants."

"Family enough, the best markets for us are the 'low' markets: France, Russia, China, Japan, where we do extremely well," he said. "The United Kingdom, United States and Australia: those markets are very saturated and brands have tremendously long presence and quite frankly, it's hard to break in."

Nonetheless, Maverick Wines has a fiercely loyal, if smaller, following at home.

"The world of wine is not fixed – it's always changing. I would love to see the day when people go to top restaurants and expect to see top Australian organic and biodynamic wine offerings there."

"In Australia we pursue a slightly different strategy," Brown said. "We don't have a single distributor, so everything is sold by us directly and we sell to some of the top hotels and restaurants in Melbourne and Sydney in particular."

After a lifetime in the industry, Brown is optimistic about the future of organic wines.

"I just hope in the next few years, Australians will develop more confidence in true organic and biodynamic farming and really appreciate the product of all this natural bounty that we have in abundance."

Find out more about Maverick Wines

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