

A Bunch of Dadds



City work pays for the passion for wine for Steve and Sharlene Dadd, owners of Optimiste vineyard, named so for their child's trials and tribulations with deafness. Lee Suckling speaks to Sharlene about making wine successfully in New South Wales

Steve and Sharlene Dadd first found affinity with wine 25 years ago. "The seed was sown on our first date - lunch in a winery, very romantic", says Sharlene. "Steve's the wine connoisseur and has always loved fine wine, even as a poor student. He was

originally a chemical engineer and worked in refineries and distilleries, so he's across the process of winemaking. He has also inherited a green thumb so has a real interest in growing grapes and sustainable agriculture."

Soon to operate a cellar door on the family vineyard in Mudgee, roughly 260 kilometres from their home in Castlecrag, Sharlene explains that her inclination towards the grapes is somewhat more akin to the inclinations of rest of us. "I simply like wine because it goes really well with fine food, great friends and good times," she exclaims. "We're not too sophisticated and definitely not into wine snobbery."

The Dadds have fantastic support from professional farming and wine industry specialists in Mudgee - viticulturists, winemakers and contractors. "They really know what they are doing and do it well," says Sharlene. "It's exciting to be a Mudgee brand right now as (the area is) really is becoming a centre of excellence in growing quality and often alternative grape varieties, sustainable vineyard management and boutique winemaking."

The pair live and work in Sydney but spend as many weekends as possible on their Mudgee farm. Mudgee means 'Nest in the Hills', Sharlene says, as she describes how much the Dadds enjoy their country surroundings. "The landscape is stunning and has been very green for some time now, since the drought broke. We have 25 acres under vine and another 150 acres of paddocks, hills and creeks. It's heaven really - we call it 'Chateau Relaxeau' but we never seem to get much time to relax."

Sharlene goes on to explain how "city work pays for our little bit of rural utopia".

"Steve works in management in the timber industry - that's his career - but wine is his passion.

"He works on the farm on weekends but doesn't see it as work; it rejuvenates him. He has an amazing amount of energy and a desire to build something great - to leave a legacy. My background was hospitality and tourism, but I left that a few years ago as one of us needed to focus full time on our family business."

Optimism is a core value of the Dadds family, and this first became apparent with the birth of Steve and Sharlene's son, Marcus. "Everyone has challenges thrown at them in life. Ours are small in comparison to many but seemed overwhelming when first presented," Sharlene explains. "Marcus has had a lot of little challenges since the day he arrived 13 years ago, including profound deafness and mobility issues, but he has great resilience and a very positive, enthusiastic outlook. Faith, hope, love and hard work make big problems become smaller."

When it came to naming the company, Sharlene and Steve coupled their son's positivity and resilience with a quotation by Helen Keller, 'Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement, nothing can be done without hope and confidence', resulting in the name Optimiste.

Such a sentiment is taken to the vineyard at Mudgee. "Farming is a combination of consistent hard work and luck. Confidence is in your efforts, and you have to just hope that you get some luck thrown your way, especially with weather, and it should result in good achievements.

"It's pretty simple to grasp the concept of optimism. Life is just better when you are consistent in what you do and try to be happy."

Hard work and determination has paid off since 1998, when the Dadds first planted their vineyard. They sold to many other winemakers for several years before launching their own brand and now produce ten varietals under the Optimiste name - Sémillon, Pinot Gris, Viognier, Rosé, Shiraz, Petit Verdot, Merlot, Tempranillo, Botrytis Sémillon and a Bordeaux blend of Cabernet/Merlot/Petit Verdot. "Our current



winemaker is Jacob Stein and he is making some formidable wines. He's one of those impressive, young, dedicated winemakers and we are very lucky to have him working his magic with our grapes."

With around 2,500 other winemakers in Australia, Optimiste has its fair share of competitors. "A lot of delicious Aussie wine is sloshing around and most of the best stuff is from New South Wales!" Sharlene proclaims. "Our points of difference are our authenticity and integrity, our single vineyard wines and our service. I'll deliver to your door usually within 24 hours of the order - often still with traces of Mudgee's rich, red earth under my finger nails."

The words 'boutique' and 'exclusive' are thrown around a lot in the wine industry, but Sharlene appropriates both to Optimiste with conviction. "Boutique means small batches of wine that are hand-crafted from low yielding vines, grown with care and attention," she says. "And exclusive means small volumes of wine produced each year, that are not widely available."

Year on year, the Optimiste varietals sell out, mostly 'on premise' at New South Wales restaurants. "Our customers are the judges of our wine quality and they have been pretty happy so far," says Sharlene. "This vintage is shaping up to be a very, very good one."

There are however, some frustrations with producing wine in this State. "It is a bit frustrating that New South Wales wine buyers aren't as parochial as in other states," Sharlene explains. "Victorians in particular love to support their own winemakers. There is so much talk about local produce yet we import so much foreign wine and transport heavy truckloads daily from other Australian states. You wouldn't want to drink Californian wine in Paris, so why drink Italian wine in Sydney?"

Remaining a wine company with integrity is, as Sharlene has said, important to the Dadds. Integrity in wine means staying "true to its origin based on the variety", she says. "(We only use) the best quality grapes you can nurture, with minimal intervention (in the winemaking process)."

The future looks bright, although not too intense, for Optimiste. "We will remain a small, boutique and exclusive family wine brand," Sharlene says. "Opening a tasting house in a hundred-year-old homestead that we are resurrecting on the Mudgee property is a huge step and will give our brand a home. It will be somewhere very special to visit, savour and reflect."

Wine is an important part of modern Australian culture, Sharlene assures. "We don't have a lot of industries left that are making something truly 'Australian' that the world market stands up and pays attention to. Australian wine is a formidable player on the world wine stage - a truly competitive local product and export.

"We also hope that more Sydneysiders choose local New South Wales wines and support our state - just 'Ask For It - NSW Wine'", Sharlene continues, noting the regional campaign slogan. She adds in jest, "Preferably from Mudgee." ■