



## Smaller wineries band together for a big impact



**S**MALLER wine producers can find it a battle to market their wines against the industry's big players.

One way around the problem is for smaller wineries to link and promote their region as a whole.

That is the course that the wineries and vineyards of the small NSW region of Cowra have decided to take and a selection of wines from the area, which includes Canowindra and Billimari, demonstrates that together they can match the industry's big companies for quality and value.

Not that the bigger and more widely known names have not taken an interest in Cowra, with the likes of McWilliams, Penfolds and Rothbury sourcing grapes from the area over the years.

Even so, their greater interests have been elsewhere and the locals have decided to do it for themselves, according to Cowra Regional

Vineyards Association president Tom Ward, who also owns Swinging Bridge wines.

"We are not the first families of Australian wine, but we are winegrowing families with a rich history and heritage and we are the icon

winemakers of our region with a vested interest in its success," Mr Ward said.

"Although the Cowra-Canowindra region has been making wine for over 30 years, it is the future that we are excited about."

The wines put forward by the group are the Rosny Sparkling Rose 2009 (about \$23), Windowrie "The Mill" Verdelho (\$18), Tom's Waterhole Semillon 2008 (\$18), Kalai Chardonnay 2008 (\$17), Cowra Estate Chardonnay 2008 (\$18), River Park Rose 2009 (\$19), Mulyan Block 9 Shiraz Viognier 2007 (\$25), Ping in the House Shiraz 2008 (\$25), Gardners Ground 2008 (\$20), Swinging Bridge Shiraz 2008 (\$20), Spring Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (\$19) and Wallington Petit Verdot 2004 (\$20).

the collection.

Cowra built its reputation largely on chardonnay. It still stands as an outstanding

representative for the region as evidenced by the Kalari and Cowra Estate.

However, the region is now much more than chardonnay with non-mainstream varieties and styles like the Rosnay Sparkling Rose, Windowrie Verdelho and Wallington Petit Verdot, while the River Park Rose (worth chasing) and Mulyan Shiraz Viognier indicate that the region is up with more recent developments in wine tastes.

At the other end is the traditional Australian shiraz, semillon and cabernet sauvignon.

Cowra might not rate highly in most consumers' shiraz thinking but it should judging by the wines put forward.

It is also worth noting that the Rosnay, Pig in the House Shiraz and Gardners Ground Shiraz are certified organic wines.

The Rosnay Sparkling Rose is an interesting blend of shiraz and mourverdre that grew out of the label's still rose success.

The Wallington Petit Verdot with more than five years behind it has had its fruit and oak marry to form a wonderfully flavoured alternative red, while the Windowrie Verdelho fills a similar role as a fresh white.

The Cowra Regional Vineyards Association has selected wisely in choosing these wines and it is in many respects unfair to single any of the wines out because each has merit.

It is also difficult to question the value, with none over \$30 and all offering a little more than the broad under-\$15 area (or more) of the market.

Allowing for generalisation, translate that to mean they are wines that are easy to like and good enough to serve on a special occasion.

The wines may not be easy to find in Tasmania but keep an eye out.

Tasmanians on the road in NSW over the



holiday period should include a Cowra stop.

Inquiries can also be made through  
[www.winesofcowra.com.au](http://www.winesofcowra.com.au).



*Tom Ward, winemaker and vineyard manager for Swinging Bridge Wines and president of the Cowra Region Vineyard Association, spoke at the recent Australian Wine Industry Environment Conference in Adelaide to explain how local growers were being encouraged to be environmentally sustainable through participation in its environmental program, the Cowra Sustainable Wine Partnership. Winetitles journalist Stephanie Keoghan recently caught up with Tom to find out more about the partnership, which engages various organisations in pursuit of its noble mission to “produce wine of regional character with the least environmental impact of any region in Australia”.*

## Cowra to take its sustainability partnership to the next level

By Stephanie Keoghan

The Cowra region is making sustainability its top priority, with many of its vineyards already taking steps towards organic production. Reflecting this goal, the Cowra Region Vineyard Association (CRVA) has joined forces with various stakeholders to develop the 'Cowra Sustainable Wine Partnership'; an initiative that was prompted by the voices of growers in the area and is about to enter its third year of operation.

The mission of the partnership is to “produce wine of regional character with the least environmental impact of any region in Australia”. It started with a push from many winegrape growers in the Cowra wine region who were already putting the time and effort into growing their produce organically and biodynamically. At least 25% of all labels in the Cowra region are

either organic or in the process of converting to organic production. Sam Statham (Rosnay Organic Wines and Olives), Jason O’Dea (Windowrie & Pig in the House), Herb Gardner (Gardners Ground) and CRVA president Tom Ward (Swinging Bridge Wines) heard the call and decided to get together and start working towards building the partnership.

Tom Ward said that the partnership had taken a little time to find its feet since its launch at the Cork ‘n’ Fork Food and Wine Festival in November 2007, but there were more and more growers in the region shifting to increasingly sustainable practices. “We noticed that there was already a large number of growers in the Cowra region growing organically, but that there’s a real lack of direction on a national level,” he said.

He said that they had sought support initially from the Lachlan Catchment

Management Authority (LCMA) and the Cowra Council, and from there gained the co-operation from other key stakeholders.

“We had been talking to the council about various issues and had started developing a relationship. They were able to see that we were serious about what we were doing, and they were keen to support as much as they were able,” Ward said. “The LCMA were also happy to become involved as they wanted to use us as an example to show others what groups can do when they come together with common objectives.”

Other stakeholders in the partnership include the Winemakers’ Federation of Australia (WFA), the NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSWDPI), Charles Sturt University in Orange (CSU) and the Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA). Ward explained that the benefits that came with the participation of these organisations in the partnership were many.



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“Obviously, the combination of resources of these associations is highly beneficial. They boast a lot of intellectual property, and having a few big names stand alongside the CRVA gives us a bit of ‘street cred’ and makes the program more attractive. The funds are a lot less limited with their participation also,” he said. “It gives us the opportunity to get the word out more efficiently, and more effectively.”

The Cowra wine region website ([www.winesofcowra.com.au](http://www.winesofcowra.com.au)) has been a key tool in getting the message across, with 4% of gross sales also going towards a regional environmental cause.

Vineyard owners are being encouraged to participate in the partnership in a variety of ways. The BFA conducted a four-day training course as part of its roadshow program in 2008, where CRVA members were encouraged to complete a chemical inputs survey. The Department of Primary Industries has also carried out a mulch trial that looked at the benefits of urban waste mulch in vineyards.

“We are trying to encourage growers to participate, rather than telling them what to do and making it a compulsory thing,” Ward said. “People seem to come and go, and things are gradually picking up, but the industry is going through a tough time at the moment, and I suppose shifting to organic production isn’t something that is high on growers’ priority lists. In my opinion, this is the exact time to seize these opportunities. Our children are going to grow up here, so sustainability is an important and immediate issue.”

The results from the DPI trials of mulch under-vine over the last few years

have proved mostly promising. The findings included a 30% decrease in water usage, an increase in carbon and nutrient levels in soils, and an increase in yield in low-yielding vineyards, despite a decrease in water use.

“It depends on which varieties you’re using the mulch on though,” Ward said. “The results were statistically worse under some vines, particularly the red varieties. The mulch essentially stabilises the variation in soil temperature, which doesn’t agree with some varieties. But, for Semillon and Chardonnay vines for example, and those that are particularly susceptible to drought, mulch under-vine can prove to be very beneficial.”

These results caught the attention of the CRVA, and the Green Waste project sprung from there. At the time, the Council was battling with mountains of lawn clippings, mulched trees and other organic matter taking up space at its Material Recycling Facility, and was finding it difficult to get rid of. Following the mostly promising results from the DPI trials on green mulch under-vine, vineyard owners started carting away the mulch for a small fee, effectively solving the council’s problem.

“This project was a great way to get the Council involved in the partnership. They saw that we were serious about reducing the Cowra wine region’s carbon footprint, and it has really opened doors for more of these projects to take off. If we are not spreading the word and getting involved with these organisations then we really are going to struggle against the tide,” Ward said.

A project that got the community involved was the recent Compost Cook-



off, where four growers, each from a different region, went head-to-head to make the best compost. Tom Ward competed alongside David Lowe, Lowe Family Wines (Mudgee); Justin Jarrett, Jarretts of Orange (Orange); and Tony Hatch, Vale Creek Wines (Bathurst). The objectives of the event were to raise the profile of composting, increase awareness about the benefits of a 'green' vineyard, raise the profile of the region as 'clean and green' placing it in a better position to receive further funding, and provide a fun environment for the community to get together and learn about organic production.

The 'compost chefs' were to use only locally sourced ingredients (within 50km of the vineyard), containing at least 30%

council waste, and they all needed to provide a written and photographic record of their composting. There were microbial and chemical analyses conducted, but the compost was also judged on inventiveness of method and ingredients, and the most translatable compost message from the chef.

Ward said, "It was a great PR opportunity to increase the awareness and popularity of compost. We have also given schools vegetable bins for the children to grow their veggies in, learn about the produce they are growing and what impact the compost has."

And it doesn't stop there. Future plans for the partnership include a variety of initiatives to be discussed at the next AGM. Guidelines for sustainable viticulture

in the Cowra region are to be developed based on grower surveys and workshops assisted by leading viticulture experts. The hope is for a large increase in the number of certified organic members, with property management plans to be put in place and followed by all CRVA members.

"One of the things that we wanted to make sure with the plan is to slowly embrace people and not scare them off. People have certainly embraced the ideas to different degrees and now we must look at how we can develop this further," Ward said. Over the next couple of months the organisations will be getting together to reinvigorate their approach to the partnership, create more awareness, and increase the number of growers involved.



**Tom Ward (left), and Vic Patrick at the 2009 Australian Wine Industry Environment Conference**