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McLaren Vale growers. Inset: Irina Santiago-Brown. Photos by Emily Shepherd.

WORDS ANTHONY MADIGAN

THE GIFT OF A FUTURE

Sitting at a kitchen table at Inkwel Wines on California Road in McLaren Vale, Dudley Brown and his wife Irina Santiago-Brown talk about the thousands of hours of voluntary work – including theirs – that have gone into the community’s Sustainable Australia Winegrowing program over the past 10 years. Then they drop the big news: the McLaren Vale Grape, Wine & Tourism Association (MVGWTA) is offering the program to other regions on a silver platter. There is no ulterior motive – just a simple acknowledgement that what is good for the Australian wine community is good for McLaren Vale.

“Sustainability is like democracy,” says Dudley, “if it doesn’t spread, it doesn’t live. And if doesn’t live, we’re all fucked.”

Dudley, who moved to McLaren Vale from California 10 years ago, has been involved in the sustainability program from day one. Soon after arriving in the region, he was explaining to his viticulturist, James Hook, that he didn’t want to be biodynamic or organic and that “there has to be another way”. James replied that, coincidentally, Dr Cliff Ohmart, who started the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing in California – the first New World sustainability system for viticulture – had just visited the region. It went from there. James started to develop a program over the next few years. He and other growers helped Jodie Pain to write the content for the manual, called *Generational Farming*.

When Dudley became chairman of the MVGWTA, he made the sustainability program a priority. They employed a part-time sustainability officer – Irina – who, fortuitously, was about to apply for her PhD at the University of Adelaide, studying sustainability assessment methods and engagement in wine growing. With the aid of a scholarship and GWRDC funding, Irina organised 14 focus groups with top wine executives and growers around the world to evaluate sustainability systems. Dudley moderated these, getting a great insight into how much sustainability systems meant to other wine nations. These insights helped Irina take the sustainability program to a whole new level, getting the seven chapters that form the basis of the program peer-reviewed by world experts.

About 120 local growers representing 50 percent of the McLaren Vale vineyard area pay an annual \$50 fee to be involved. They log details of their vineyard practices including an exportable spray diary and irrigation programs on a website with everything tied to GPS coordinates. Growers are rated from one to four. Individual data is confidential, but members can benchmark their progress against the average score in McLaren Vale. Ten percent of members are audited at random each year by a third party (for free). Even better, the region can benchmark its aggregate performance with chemical usage and the like.

“The system is all about helping people to become better farmers and allowing them to determine the path they want

to follow to achieve that,” says Irina. “It helps them be aware of the choices in front of them. We operate on a system of continuous improvement. The reporting side of things is just an output. The real spirit of the program is very much about educating the community and competing to be better – everyone trying to lift each other up for the benefit of all of us. The key is that it’s incredibly easy to use. Quite a few use it as the basis for all management decision making.”

Dudley’s convinced the sustainability system is the model for the future of the Australian wine industry. “This is all about *doing*, and we want other people to *do*,” he says. “It’s about getting better, and getting a better result. People hear about these things and think it’s about the environment, it’s not *just* about the environment, it’s about growers getting better at what they do on the farm. It’s about man interacting and being socially responsible in the community and economically sustainable – there’s no green when you’re in the red.

“And the thing is, once you start doing it, getting 10 or 15 people together, the conversation will drift like ours did to other parts of the community where you can do some good. This whole new dynamic starts about people solving their own problems and pushing things forward and not waiting for people to fix their problems who are never going to fix them. If you think that any national body or government is going to come along and save your region’s arse in this industry, you’re crazy. The only ones who can do it are the people on the ground. It’s about encouraging on-the-ground leadership and taking responsibility for your communities.”

In 2013 about 40 percent of all McLaren Vale Shiraz was sold for \$3,000 a tonne or more. How much of that can be attributed to the sustainability system? “The market fact is that there is a fair bit of demand for high quality fruit. Our program enables growers to grow to that specification reliably and profitably,” says Dudley.

Marc Allgrove, MGVWTA chief executive, hopes other wine regions will see the benefit in adopting the McLaren Vale system in the interests of Australian wine. “If another wine region wants to use it, it’s ready to go now,” he says. “But if you were to start from scratch, it would take you three or four years and an investment of \$500,000 minimum, when all of the volunteer hours have been taken into account. We tried to tally up the amount that’s been invested in the past four years by a variety of bodies in terms of actual cash or hours of work, and it has to be close to half a million. But to tailor it to your region it would cost a tenth of that. The system can be adjusted for regional differences with some work by people in those regions, and it can easily be picked up and transported. It’s ready to go now.

“There is a bit of background work that needs to be done to make it work in other regions, but the first step is to put it out there to gauge the interest. I think you have to take a long-term view in this industry. Yes, it’s about the environment, the economy and the future, but we all have these pleasures we enjoy in McLaren Vale, whether it be the wine, the food or the beaches... it’s about ensuring the next generation can enjoy these pleasures, but, more importantly, that the next

generation can continue to make a living from those pleasures, and that is what sustainability is about.”

In February Dudley and Irina tied the knot at Inkwel Wines. During the reception, they gathered guests together for a now-famous selfie, which won the *WBM* Selfie Competition, the first prize being \$5,000 worth of advertising in this magazine. Irina and Dudley, who writes a blog called *TheWineRules*, decided to gift the space to the Sustainable Australia Winegrowing program, rather than use it to promote their wine brand. Dudley’s hard-earned prize is on Page 48 and 49 of this issue. Irina gathered together people in the community for a photo to demonstrate the community nature of the program.

“When you get a gift like this, why wouldn’t you share it?” says Dudley. “Irina has been a tremendous beneficiary of the wine industry. It’s invested a lot in her, so what better way than to give something back? When we started this program, the one rule that was placed above all others was that this was all open source. We borrowed from other people and now other people are free to borrow from us. There’s no pride of ownership. We’re not trying to make money. We understand we can’t be sustainable alone. Sue Bell hit the nail on the head in *WBM* a few months ago when she said, ‘We should be looking at wine rather than who we’re competing against; we need the French wine industry to be healthy as much as we need the Australian wine industry to be healthy. Coonawarra needs Margaret River and the Riverland to be healthy.’

“And that is exactly what this is about. Our competitors aren’t in the Barossa or the Hunter, our competitors are gin, craft beer and cider. This is too important to leave in McLaren Vale, the whole country has to have it. Australia was the only New World wine country that didn’t have a widely-adopted sustainability program. Now it does. A lot of us have worked on this program for 10 years. We’ve had people writing cheques out of their own pockets to pay for stuff along the way. It’s been a huge community effort. Jock Harvey, Derek Cameron, James Hook, Richard Leask, Rachel Steer, Irina, Toby Bekkers, Jodie Pain, me ... there would be 25 people who have made huge personal commitments to this. But we know that for it to succeed, it needs to grow. Every baby bird needs to fly.”

Marc adds: “And sometimes the bird needs someone to push it out of the nest, and Dudley and Irina’s decision to donate the advertising space has given us the perfect platform to send a message to the rest of the wine industry.”

Speaking of birds, they have a big role to play in all of this. “One Friday night I received a call from a grower,” Irina explains. “He said, ‘do you really expect me to go out and count how many different kinds of trees and birds there are on my property?’ I said ‘yes, go and walk with your kids and get them interested in your property.’ So they did. And they enjoyed it. The next generation are buying into this.” ■

• To register your vineyard for 2014/15, visit www.sustainableaustralia.info. To register your interest in your region or state adopting Sustainable Australia Winegrowing, phone Dr Irina Santiago-Brown on (08) 8323 8999 or email irina@mclarenvale.info