



Thistle Hill winemaker and general manager Michael Slater believes well-made organic wines achieve unparalleled levels of flavour clarity.

Wines 'walk out the door'

By SARAH SLEE

THISTLE Hill presents organic winemaking as a professional and forward-thinking philosophy. Winemaker and general manager Michael Slater, in just his second year at Thistle Hill, is determined to lift the standards of organic winemaking – and already his organic, preservative-free wines are walking out the door.

"In the past, many people who made organic wines did so with a laid-back attitude and, as a result, the wines haven't been that good," Mr Slater said.

"But if you put in the hard work that needs to be done, the quality of organic wines is so much better."

Setting a high standard from the very beginning, Michael's first-ever Thistle Hill wine was awarded Best Wine of Show at the 2009 Australia and New Zealand Organic Wine Show. The riesling was a stand-out achievement, but Mr Slater also has high hopes for the soon-to-be-released 2009 reds. Thistle Hill's 2010 riesling – presently being bottled – also looks very promising.

Demand for organic wine has

AT A GLANCE

- Professional approach to organic winemaking
- One of world's oldest organic wineries
- 2009 Riesling best organic wine

increased market opportunities for Thistle Hill. Sales have grown exponentially, and there is strong interest from Asian markets. Significant investment has been made to upgrade and expand the Thistle Hill winery to handle more fruit, and owners Rob and Mary Loughan's neighbouring vineyard Erudgere is also in the process of becoming certified organic to supply the winery.

Consumers value organic produce for its environmental and health benefits, but Mr Slater says organic grapes also produce a higher quality wine.

"Well-made organic wines have clarity of flavour that you don't see in non-organic wines," he said.

"When you grow grapes organically, you are growing them more naturally – the way

they want to be grown. Yield is lower, which makes a big difference in quality. Organic fruit is more indicative of the variety and the region, because you are not manipulating the vines."

Thistle Hill is reputed to be the oldest organic vineyard in Australia – and one of the oldest in the world. Although it was not certified organic until 1993, the vineyard has been grown organically since its establishment in 1975.

Michael grew up on an organic vineyard in the Mudgee region, and went on to study winemaking at Charles Sturt University. He says working for large wine companies was good experience, but not what he ultimately wanted to do.

"I want to produce wines in a socially-conscious way. We are not just here to make money, we are here to produce wine sustainably and set an example," Mr Slater said.

"I want to promote organics as a modern, professional, quality-driven product. This is something I really believe in."

Details: Thistle Hill thistlehill.com.au

Mudgee embraces new era of production

AT A GLANCE

- Innovative, determined producers
- Strong organic sector
- Next generation returns to region

By SARAH SLEE

LONG regarded as the Australian home of chardonnay, Mudgee has taken a back seat in recent years as a premier wine region, with others moving into the spotlight.

But a small group of local winemakers is determined to put Mudgee chardonnay back on the radar by holding a friendly, but fierce, contest.

Five winemakers are battling it out to create the best light-bodied, food-friendly chardonnay, - as opposed the heavy, high-alcohol wines traditionally made in the region - in an attempt to rebuild the reputation of Mudgee chardonnay.

New South Wales Wine Industry Association president David Lowe, of Lowe Wines, is one of those winemakers. He says Mudgee grapegrowers and winemakers are known to be open-minded, innovative and determined. It is these qualities that will stand the region in good stead as the wine industry enters a new era.

Left to fend for themselves after the companies that traditionally provided a market for their grapes deserted the region, Mudgee growers are now determined to create their own market opportunities.

They plan to remove just 30 per cent of the region's vines over the next three years – far less than what was recommended in the Wine Restructuring Action Agenda.

"We believe we have the ability to sell more wine and do better than what we have in the past," Mr Lowe said.

"Vineyards that are producing poorer quality fruit are being removed and more time is being spent improving the quality of our wines. We are also doing more regional marketing in Sydney, and developing a stronger relationship with the Australian Wine Research Institute.

"We are being innovative in our wine production and grape growing, and using more of the region's natural climatic features to produce lighter-bodied, brighter wines without relying on the big, strong, alcoholic wines that we have in the past."

As the next generation of grapegrowers and winemakers return to the region, in numbers not seen for some time, they bring new ideas and innovations with them – and the future looks bright for Mudgee.

One of the region's marketing advantages is its strong organic sector. Mudgee has the highest proportion of organic wineries anywhere in Australia. With its continental climate, well-drained soils and 40 years of experience in organic production, it is well-positioned to market itself as the organic wine region of Australia.

Several local winemakers, including Mr Lowe, are creating preservative-free organic wines, which have proved immensely popular.

"Making organic, preservative-free wine is probably the hardest thing I've ever done, but it's also been incredibly successful," he said.

"There's a lot of interest in good quality, preservative-free wine. It's extremely hard to make, but if you can make a good one, you are going to be successful. There is a huge awareness amongst consumers about preservative-free, but the market is poorly served.

"But we are working on that, and our pioneering will pay."

Details: Lowe Wines lowewine.com



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